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Shaivism: History and Development

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Shaivism: History and Development

Shaivism means worship of Shiva as the supreme god. It grew out of Rudra, a god in the Rig Veda. Over time it gained sects, saints and schools of thought. The key groups are the Pashupatas, the 63 Nayanars, Shaiva Siddhanta and Kashmir Shaivism.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **Root**Rudra in the Rig Veda.

02 **Upanishad**Svetasvatara names Rudra-Shiva creator.

03 **Nayanars**63 Tamil saints.

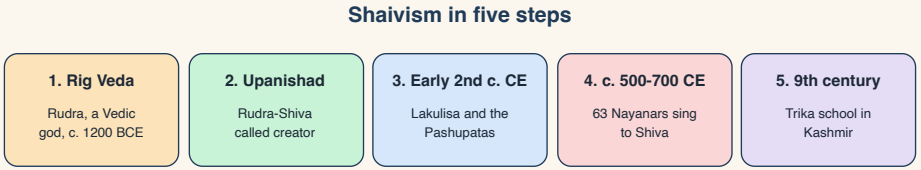
04 **Two schools**Dualist and non-dualist.

Where Shaivism began

1 Shaivism in brief

1.1 What is Shaivism?

Shaivism is the worship of Shiva as the highest god. It is one of the main traditions of Hinduism. It grew over more than a thousand years. It began with a Vedic god and ended with saints, sects and schools of thought.



A Vedic god grew into a faith with saints, sects and schools.

Original diagram. Dates from the sources listed under each card.

The story in five boxes.

1.2 Why does the order matter?

Exams ask what came first. Each step builds on the one before. Rudra comes first, then the Upanishad that names him Shiva. Sects and saints follow. The great philosophies come last.

1.3 What are the big turning points?

- **c. 1200 BCE:** Rudra appears in the Rig Veda.
- **Svetasvatara Upanishad:** Rudra-Shiva is called the creator.
- **Early 2nd century CE:** Lakulisa and the Pashupatas.
- **c. 500-700 CE:** the 63 Nayanars.
- **9th century:** the Trika school in the North.
- **Mid-12th century:** the Virashaivas, or Lingayats.

> **Quick check 1.** True or false: Shaivism is the worship of Shiva as the highest god. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 2.** True or false: Shaivism began with the Nayanars. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org

2 From Rudra to Shiva

2.1 Who was Rudra?

Rudra was a god in the Rig Veda. The Rig Veda is the oldest Veda. It dates to about 1200 BCE. Scholars say an early figure there developed into Rudra. Later, Rudra grew into Shiva.

2.2 How big was Rudra in the Rig Veda?

He was not a major god. Only four hymns are dedicated to him alone. Compare that with the many hymns for Indra or Agni. Many books call him a minor storm god. The sources here do not use those words, so treat that line as a book description.

2.3 When did Rudra become Shiva?

The Svetasvatara Upanishad is the key text. An Upanishad is a late Vedic book on the nature of reality. This one is possibly as old as the sixth century BCE.

Many exam books give c. 400-200 BCE. The text calls Rudra-Shiva the original creator. It also calls him Brahman, the highest reality.

2.4 Which Shiva features are not Vedic?

In the Rig Veda, Rudra is not shown as Pashupati, the lord of animals. He is also not shown as a yogi. Those pictures of Shiva came later.

> **Quick check 3.** True or false: Only four Rig Vedic hymns are for Rudra alone. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 4. True or false: In the Rig Veda, Rudra is shown as a yogi. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: ncert.nic.in

3 The Harappan seal

3.1 What is the seal?

A seal from Mohenjo-daro has been studied closely. Some scholars read its seated figure as an early Shiva. People often call this figure a “proto-Shiva”. Proto means first or early.

3.2 How sure are we?

Not very sure. The reading rests on interpretation. The link from Rudra to Shiva rests on actual texts. That is a much firmer base.

21. **Think it through:** Why is a text safer evidence than a picture? See answer ↓

Quick check 5. True or false: The proto-Shiva seal is as firmly proven as the Rudra-Shiva textual link. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 6. True or false: The seal was found at Mohenjo-daro. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sects and saints

4 The Pashupatas

4.1 Who were the Pashupatas?

The Pashupatas were ascetics, people who live a strict, simple life. They are one of the oldest named Shaivite sects.



The Pashupatinath Temple in Kathmandu, Nepal, historically linked to the Pashupata tradition of Shaivism. Photo by Nabin K. Sapkota, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

4.2 Who was Lakulisa?

Lakulisa is the teacher linked with the sect. He lived around the early part of the second century CE. Some books give a wider range, from the 2nd century BCE to the 2nd century CE. The source gives the early second century CE.

4.3 Who were his disciples?

He had four major disciples. They were Kaurushya, Garga, Mitra and Kushika.

4.4 What about the Gujarat and Rajasthan inscriptions?

Some books say 5th to 7th century inscriptions in Gujarat and Rajasthan show Pashupata monasteries. We could not confirm this in the sources we read. Check it in your own book.

> **Quick check 7.** True or false: The Pashupatas are among the oldest named Shaivite sects. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 8.** True or false: Lakulisa had five major disciples. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 The Nayanars

5.1 Who were the Nayanars?

The Nayanars were 63 Shaivite saints of South India. They sang in Tamil in praise of Shiva.

One source places them between about 500 and 700 CE. The Smithsonian places Tamil poet-saints in the seventh through ninth centuries. Many books say the 6th to 9th century. Learn the range, not one year.

5.2 Why do they matter?

The Nayanars were among the first supporters of the bhakti movement. Bhakti means loving devotion to a god. It is a path open to all, not only to priests.

5.3 Which poets are named in the sources?

Three names matter most.

Three Nayanar-era poets

Poet	Period	Known for
Appar	Seventh century	A Tamil poet-saint who sang to Shiva
Sambandar	About the seventh century	Hymns in the Thevaram
Sundarar	Eighth century	Hymns in the Thevaram; named Nandanar in a verse

Sources: Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art and New World Encyclopedia.

5.4 Who was Nandanar?

Nandanar is the eighteenth of the 63 Nayanars. The Shaiva saint Sundarar mentioned him in the 8th century. The scholar Nambiyandar Nambi mentioned him in an 11th century verse. His life story is told in the 12th century Periya Puranam, by the Chola minister Sekkizhar.

> **Quick check 9.** True or false: There were 63 Nayanars. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 10. True or false: The Nayanars were devotees of Vishnu. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: asia-archive.si.edu; newindianexpress.com

6 Tamil hymn books

6.1 What is the Thevaram?

The first seven collections of hymns are known as the Thevaram. They were composed in the seventh-eighth century CE. Their poets were Nancampantar, Sambandar and Sundarar.

6.2 What is the Tirumurai?

The Tirumurai is the full set of Tamil Shaiva hymns. It has eleven collections, plus a Tamil Purana called the Periya Puranam. It took shape about the tenth century CE.

6.3 Where does Tirumular fit?

Tirumular was a Nayanar of the seventh or eighth century CE. His book, the Tirumantiram, is the tenth book of the Tirumurai.

Tamil Shaiva books

Book	What it is	Date
Thevaram	The first seven collections of hymns	Seventh-eighth century CE
Tirumantiram	A work by Tirumular, the tenth book	Tirumular: seventh or eighth century CE

Book	What it is	Date
Tirumurai	Eleven collections plus the Periya Puranam	About the tenth century CE
Periya Puranam	Life stories of the 63 Nayanars, by Sekkizhar	12th century
Meykantasastras	Core texts of Shaiva Siddhanta	About the 13th-14th century CE

Source: New World Encyclopedia (Shaivism) and The New Indian Express.

Quick check 11. True or false: The Thevaram is the first seven collections of hymns. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 12. True or false: The Tirumantiram was written by Sekkizhar. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Schools, reform and temples

7 Shaiva Siddhanta

7.1 What does it teach?

Shaiva Siddhanta is the main Shaiva philosophy of the South. It splits reality into three. The soul is pashu. God is pati. The bond that ties the soul down is pasha. The source calls this split dualistic.

7.2 What is dualism?

Dualism means two things stay separate. Here, the soul and God remain distinct. The soul does not become God.

7.3 Which texts hold it?

The Meykantasastras are its core texts. They date to about the thirteenth-fourteenth century CE.

> **Quick check 13.** True or false: In Shaiva Siddhanta, the soul and God are distinct. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 14.** True or false: Pasha means the soul. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

8 Kashmir Shaivism

8.1 What is Kashmir Shaivism?

By the ninth century, Shaivism had come to prominence in the North. The Trika school was the form it took. Tantric ideas had been strong in Shaivism since the Gupta period. Tantra here means ritual and meditation practices.

8.2 What is Pratyabhijna?

Pratyabhijna means recognition. The idea is simple. The soul is already one with Shiva. It only has to recognise this. The school was originated by Somananda and propounded by Utpala Deva. Somananda formulated it around the ninth century CE.

8.3 Who were the key thinkers?

Vasugupta lived about 800 CE. His student Kallata lived 850-900 CE. Abhinavagupta flourished about 975-1025. He practised the Krama, Trika and Kula schools. Older notes give 925-1025 for Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta together.

Two schools compared

Question	Shaiva Siddhanta	Kashmir Shaivism (Trika)
Where?	South India	Kashmir and the North
Soul and Shiva	Distinct from each other	Already one; the soul must only recognise it
Type of view	Dualist	Non-dualist

Question	Shaiva Siddhanta	Kashmir Shaivism (Trika)
Key idea	Pati, pashu, pasha	Pratyabhijna, or recognition
Key names	Meykantasastras (13th-14th century)	Somananda, Utpaladeva, Abhinavagupta

Source: New World Encyclopedia (Shaivism and Abhinavagupta).

Exam dates and source dates

Item	Dates in many exam books	Dates in the sources used here
Svetasvatara Upanishad	c. 400-200 BCE	Possibly as far back as the sixth century BCE
Lakulisa	2nd century BCE to 2nd century CE	Early part of the second century CE
Nayanars	6th to 9th century CE	About 500-700 CE (one source); 7th to 9th century (another)
Abhinavagupta	Active about 925-1025 CE	Flourished about 975-1025

Sources: New World Encyclopedia (Shaivism and Abhinavagupta) and the Smithsonian National Museum of Asian Art. If an exam gives one of the left-hand dates, it is a book date. Learn both.

22. **Think it through:** Do the two schools agree? See answer ↓

Quick check 15. True or false: Shaiva Siddhanta and Kashmir Shaivism give the same answer about the soul and Shiva. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 16. True or false: Pratyabhijna means recognition. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: newworldencyclopedia.org

9 Virashaivas

9.1 Who were the Virashaivas?

The Virashaivas are also called the Lingayats. They were a reformist Shaivite sect. They formed on the border of Maharashtra and Karnataka in the mid-twelfth century.

9.2 Who was Basava?

Basava is the best-known name tied to the movement. He lived from 1106 to 1167 CE.

Quick check 17. True or false: The Lingayats are also called Virashaivas. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 18. True or false: Basava lived in the 9th century. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: indianexpress.com

10 Puranas and temples

10.1 How did Shaivism spread?

It spread fastest when the Puranas rose to prominence under the Gupta dynasty, about 320-500 CE. Puranas are long books of stories about gods. They carried Shiva worship across the subcontinent.

10.2 Which Puranas centre on Shiva?

Shiva is the central god in the Shiva Purana. He is also central in the Linga, Matsya, Kurma, Skanda and Agni Puranas.

10.3 Which temples show this?

Three sites stand out in the sources.

Shiva temples in the sources

Temple	Date	Where
Elephanta Caves	5th to 8th century	Near Mumbai; dedicated mainly to Shiva
Kailasa temple	About 770 CE	Ellora; carved from rock
Nataraja Temple	About 1150-1200 CE	Chidambaram

Sources: Ministry of Culture and World History Encyclopedia.

10.4 Where does Ellora fit?

Ellora in Maharashtra has rock-cut caves from the 6th to 8th century CE. The Kailasa temple there was finished about 770 CE and is dedicated to Shiva.

10.5 Where can I read more?

See Gods of the Vedic Age for Rudra in the Vedic setting. See Rigvedic Religion and the Later Vedic Age for the wider shift. For temples, see Somnath and Kashi Vishwanath.

> **Quick check 19.** True or false: The Kailasa temple at Ellora is dedicated to Shiva. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 20.** True or false: Shaivism spread fastest before the Gupta period. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: culture.gov.in; worldhistory.org

Exam Practice

11 How exams test this

11.1 What does a real question look like?

Asked before

PYQ 1 · UPSC Combined Defence Services (II) 2019, General Knowledge, Q58

Who were the Nayanars?

(a) Those who were immersed in devotion to Vishnu
(b) Those who were devotees of Buddha
(c) Leaders who were devotees of Shiva
(d) Leaders who were devotees of Basveshwara

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11.2 What traps repeat?

- **Nayanars or Alvars?** Nayanars follow Shiva. Alvars follow Vishnu.
- **Which Upanishad?** Svetasvatara calls Rudra-Shiva the creator.
- **Which school is dualist?** Shaiva Siddhanta. Kashmir Shaivism is non-dualist.
- **Pashu, pati, pasha:** soul, God, bond.
- **Lingayats:** also called Virashaivas. Basava, mid-12th century.

Remember this

- **Root:** Rudra in the Rig Veda. Svetasvatara Upanishad calls Rudra-Shiva the creator.
- **Sects and saints:** Pashupatas, then the 63 Nayanars.
- **Schools:** Shaiva Siddhanta is dualist. Kashmir Shaivism is non-dualist.
- **Reform:** Virashaivas, mid-12th century.

Explain it back: Say how Shaiva Siddhanta and Kashmir Shaivism differ on the soul, and why that makes them opposite views.

Practice MCQs

1. Rudra's identification with Shiva is well-established in the textual record. Where is this identification first made explicit?

A. The Svetasvatara Upanishad

B. The Rig Veda itself

C. The Arthashastra

D. The Ashokan edicts

See answer ↓

2. Which Harappan-era artifact may show an early prototype of Shiva, though the connection is debated?

A. The Bull seal

B. The Dancing Girl statue

C. The Pashupati seal

D. The Priest-King statue

See answer ↓

3. Which Rig Vedic god is widely seen as a forerunner of the later Shiva tradition?

A. Indra

B. Varuna

C. Rudra

D. Agni

See answer ↓

4. Who were the roughly 63 Tamil devotional poet-saints who promoted Shiva worship in South India?

A. The Alvars

B. The Nayanars

C. The Siddhas

D. The Acharyas

See answer ↓

5. Which two scholars, active around 925-1025 CE, most shaped Kashmir Shaivism's Trika school?

A. Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta

B. Shankara and Ramanuja

C. Patanjali and Kapila

D. Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu

See answer ↓

6. Consider these two statements about Shaivism's development.

Statement 1: Puranic texts played a major role in systematising Shiva worship.

Statement 2: Kashmir Shaivism's central philosophical idea is called Pratyabhijna, or "Recognition." Which statement(s) is/are correct?

A. Only Statement 1

B. Only Statement 2

C. Both statements

D. Neither statement

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **A.** The correct answer is **The Svetasvatara Upanishad**. This text calls Rudra-Shiva the creator and the Brahman, the one essence of the universe. One source dates it as far back as the sixth century BCE, though other sources give a later range. The Rig Veda is wrong because it only has a few hymns to Rudra, and he is still a fearsome god there. The Arthashastra and the Ashokan edicts are wrong because they are not texts of Shiva worship. In the Rig Veda, Rudra is neither Pashupati nor a yogi. Memory hook: Svetasvatara makes Rudra into Shiva. ↑ Q1
2. **C.** The correct answer is **The Pashupati seal**. It comes from Mohenjo-daro. It shows a horned figure seated in a yogic posture and surrounded by animals. Some scholars read it as an early form of Shiva, but the link is debated. The Dancing Girl and the Priest-King are wrong because they are statues, not seals. The Bull seal is wrong because it is a different Harappan seal. Memory hook: Pashupati means lord of the creatures. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The correct answer is **Rudra**. The Rig Veda (about 1200 BCE) shows an early Shiva-like figure developing into Rudra. He is a fearsome god of disease and the wilderness. Only four Rig Vedic hymns are for him alone. Later texts treat Rudra and Shiva as one. In the Rig Veda he is neither Pashupati nor a yogi. Indra, Varuna and Agni are wrong because they stay separate gods of storm, order and fire. They do not turn into Shiva. Memory hook: Rudra becomes Shiva. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** The correct answer is **The Nayanars**. They were 63 Tamil poet-saints who sang in praise of Shiva. They are among the early bhakti, or devotional, movements of South India. Sources date them differently, from about 500-700 CE to the 7th-9th centuries. The Alvars are wrong because they were devotees of Vishnu. The Siddhas and Acharyas are wrong because they are not the 63 Shiva poet-saints. Memory hook: Nayanars are Shiva's 63. ↑ Q4

5. **A.** The correct answer is **Utpaladeva and Abhinavagupta**. Somananda began the Pratyabhijna, or recognition, school. Utpaladeva then set out its ideas. Abhinavagupta, who worked about 975-1025 CE, studied the Krama, Trika and Kula schools. The Trika school was strong in Kashmir by the 9th century. Shankara and Ramanuja are wrong because they are Vedanta teachers. Patanjali and Kapila are wrong because they belong to Yoga and Samkhya. Nagarjuna and Vasubandhu are wrong because they are Buddhist thinkers. Memory hook: Kashmir Shaivism, Utpala and Abhinava. ↑ Q5
6. **C.** The correct answer is **Both statements**. Statement 1 is true because the Puranas rose to prominence under the Guptas, and Shaivism spread fastest then. The Shiva, Linga, Matsya, Kurma, Skanda and Agni Puranas make Shiva the central god. Statement 2 is true because Pratyabhijna, meaning recognition, is the school of Kashmir Shaivism that Somananda began. So the other three options are wrong. Memory hook: Puranas spread it, Pratyabhijna names it. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** That is what the word means. It is one of the main traditions of Hinduism. ↑ 1
2. **False.** It began much earlier, with Rudra in the Rig Veda. The Nayanars came around 500 to 700 CE. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The source says only four of the Rig Vedic hymns are dedicated exclusively to him. ↑ 3
4. **False.** Unlike Shiva, Rudra in the Rig Veda is neither shown as Pashupati nor as a yogi. ↑ 4
5. **False.** The seal rests on interpretation. The Rudra-Shiva link rests on texts. ↑ 5
6. **True.** It is a well-studied find from Mohenjo-daro. ↑ 6
7. **True.** That is how the source describes them. ↑ 7
8. **False.** He had four: Kaurushya, Garga, Mitra and Kushika. ↑ 8
9. **True.** The Periya Puranam tells the lives of the 63 Nayanars. ↑ 9
10. **False.** They were devotees of Shiva. The Alvars follow Vishnu. ↑ 10
11. **True.** They were composed in the seventh-eighth century CE. ↑ 11
12. **False.** Tirumular wrote the Tirumantiram. Sekkizhar wrote the Periya Puranam. ↑ 12

13. **True.** The source calls the view dualistic: souls (pashu), God (pati) and the world (pasha). ↑ 13
14. **False.** Pasha is the bond. Pashu is the soul. ↑ 14
15. **False.** Shaiva Siddhanta says they are distinct. Kashmir Shaivism says the soul is already one with Shiva. ↑ 15
16. **True.** The soul must recognise its identity with Shiva. ↑ 16
17. **True.** They formed in the mid-twelfth century. ↑ 17
18. **False.** He lived 1106-1167 CE. ↑ 18
19. **True.** It was completed about 770 CE. ↑ 19
20. **False.** It spread most rapidly when the Puranas rose under the Guptas. ↑ 20
21. **Think it through.** A text says in words who a god is. A picture can be read in many ways. That is why the Rudra-Shiva link is treated as firmer than the seal. ↑ 21
22. **Think it through.** Shaiva Siddhanta keeps the soul and Shiva apart. Kashmir Shaivism says the soul is already Shiva and only needs to recognise it. ↑ 22

Previous year answers

1. **(c) Leaders who were devotees of Shiva** The Nayanars were Shiva saints. The Alvars followed Vishnu. Option (a) describes the Alvars.

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