

The Antelope Attribute of Shiva

by Dinesh Sathisan

Shiva takes on several manifestations. Each manifestation accompanies a myth that explains his form and attributes present with each form. Apart from Shiva's typical *damaru* (kettledrum), *trishula* (trident) and *parashu* (axe), the antelope (*mriga*) is seen in several avatars (manifestations) of Shiva. In the Asian Civilisations Museum's late Chola bronze Somaskanda, Shiva is seen holding an antelope in his left hand.

One myth describes some of the attributes as weapons that were wielded upon him. As a wandering ascetic (*Bhairava*), Shiva was said to have been so handsome that the wives of hermits in the forest almost forgot their marital vows. Their jealous husbands then threw at Shiva, among other things, an axe, a tiger and an antelope, which, as it leapt, Shiva seized and held motionless. So what is the symbolism behind the antelope?

In Indian art, animals often act as metaphors. In the epic Ramayana, the golden antelope that appears before Sita represents illusion. As an attribute in Shiva's hand, the antelope may have the same meaning. After all, Shiva is seen as the god who removes the veil of illusion for his devotees. In the RgVeda myth of Rudra, Prajapati (Lord of Generation and predecessor of Brahma) took on the form of an antelope and approached his daughter, Usas, whom he desired. Since their act was against the order of nature, an archer aimed his arrow at Prajapati who in fear exclaimed, "I make you Lord of the Animals. Leave me." The archer, named Rudra, who in Brahminical Hinduism becomes Shiva, then gains lordship over the animals. Shiva's epithet, Pasupati, literally means 'Lord of Animals' and his holding on to the antelope, an animal signifying untamed nature because of its speed, shows his power and control over nature and natural forces.

Shiva's antelope may also have come from the older Indus Valley tradition where the antelope was the master of the animal kingdom, denoting sovereignty over nature. In South Indian art, the antelope, which was considered a very powerful animal, represents all animals, including humans, whose god is Shiva. Other stories point to how the antelope represents Shiva's mastery over the restless springing about of the human mind, since the animal is constantly leaping around. In Shiva's hands, it becomes still; nature is kept in control.



Asian Civilisations Museum's 11th Century bronze Somaskanda

Dinesh Sathisan was the youngest docent to join Museum Volunteers in 2005 after successfully convincing the interview panel that despite being a busy university student, he had time to devote to the museum. He guides at the ACM and the Peranakan Museum. Dinesh has a special interest in the arts of South and Southeast Asia and loves to research and write on the cultural significance and symbolism behind myths and motifs.
