

[Saivism: Six Schools](#)

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Introduction

Saivism is not a single, hierarchical system. It is a thousand traditions, great and small. In the broadest sense Saivism is life itself. Philosophically it may be understood as six major traditions with many similarities and a few differences. In the search for peace, enlightenment and Liberation, no path is more tolerant, more mystical, more widespread or more ancient than Saivite Hinduism. Through history Saivism has developed a vast array of lineages and traditions, each with unique philosophic-cultural-linguistic characteristics, as it dominated India prior to 1100 from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka, from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. Here we seek to present the essential features of six major traditions identifiable within the ongoing Saiva context: Saiva Siddhanta, Pashupata Saivism, Kashmir Saivism, Vira Saivism, Siva Advaita and Siddha Siddhanta. It should be understood that this formal and somewhat intellectual division, however useful, is by no means a comprehensive description of Saivism, nor is it the only possible list. In practice, Saivism is far more rich and varied than these divisions imply. Our discussion of these six schools and their related traditions is based upon historical information. There are wide gaps in the record, but we do know that at each point where the veil of history lifts, the worship of Siva is there. The Saiva Agamas form the foundation and circumference of all the schools of Saivism. The system of philosophy set forth in the Agamas is common to a remarkable degree among all these schools of thought.

These Agamas are theistic, that is, they all identify Siva as the Supreme Lord, immanent and transcendent, capable of accepting worship as the personal Lord and of being realized through yoga. This above all else is the connecting strand through all the schools. Philosophically, the Agamic tradition includes the following principle doctrines: 1) the five powers of Siva: creation, preservation, destruction, revealing and concealing grace; 2) The three categories, Pati, pashu and pasha-God, souls and bonds; 3) the three bonds: anava, karma and maya; 4) the three-fold power of Siva-iccha, kriya and jnana shakti; 5) the thirty-six tattvas, or categories of existence, from the five elements to God; 6) the need for the satguru and initiation; 7) the power of mantra; 8) the four padas: charya, kriya, yoga and jnana. As we explore the individual schools and lineages within Saivism, keep in mind that all adhere to these doctrines. Our discussion necessarily focuses on the differences between one school and another, but this is not meant to obscure the overwhelming similarity of belief and practice among them. Agamic philosophy and practices are conveyed to the common man through other channels, one of which is the Saiva Puranas. These oral collections of stories about the Gods are interspersed with Agamic philosophy. A second channel is the Saivite temple itself, for the construction of the temples and the performance of the rituals are all set forth in the Agamas-in fact it is one of their main subjects. The priests follow manuals called paddhati, which are summaries of the instructions for worship contained in the Saiva Agamas, specifically the shodasha upacharas, or sixteen acts of puja worship, such as offering of food, incense and water. A third channel is the songs and bhajanas of the sants, which in their simplicity carry powerful philosophic import. A fourth is the on-going oral teachings of gurus, swamis, panditas, shastris, priests and elders. Such matters of agreement belie the fact that Saivism is not a

single, hierarchical system. Rather, it is a thousand traditions, great and small. Some are orthodox and pious, while others are iconoclastic and even-like the Kapalikas and the Aghoris-fiercely ascetic, eccentric or orgiastic. For some, Siva is the powerful, terrible, awesome destroyer, but for most He is love itself, compassionate and gentle. For nearly all of the millions of Siva's devotees, Saivism is not, therefore, a school or philosophy; it is life itself. To them Saivism means love of Siva, and they simply follow the venerable traditions of their family and community. These men and women worship in the temples and mark life's passages by holy sacraments. They go on pilgrimages, perform daily prayers, meditations and yogic disciplines. They sing holy hymns, share Puranic folk narratives and recite scriptural verses. Still, it is useful for us all to understand the formal streams of thought which nurture and sustain our faith. Now, in our brief description of these six schools, we begin with today's most prominent form of Saivism, Saiva Siddhanta.