

HUSBAND AND WIFE AND THE GAME OF DICE: ŚIVA AND PĀRVATĪ FALL APART

Don Handelman

Relationships of kinship and marriage are prominent subjects of discussion in anthropologies of India. Kinship-based forms of organization often are perceived as the lineaments of social relationships and of membership in local groups. Yet, to where should we look for hints of the tacit premises that may underlie indigenous conceptions of sexual identities, and of relatedness between the sexes? Cosmology – the logic(s) of how cosmos is organized and organizes – is one such domain of tacit premises. The metaphysics of cosmic logics are often embedded in narratives of cosmic beginnings and other doings, in other words, in myth. Looking through myth is one fruitful way of trying to enter tacit premises of culture. In this regard, despite the pathbreaking works of O’Flaherty (1973) and Shulman (1981), relatively little scholarly attention has been given to tacit premises that may inform relationships between male and female in Hindu myth. This is what I will begin to discuss here, using one myth.

In this brief exegesis, I address aspects of the metaphysics of gender in Śaiva mythology – in particular, the relationship between Śiva and his wife, Pārvatī, and how this is formed through the destructive mediation of the game of dice. The context of this discussion is the book by David Shulman and myself, entitled, *God Inside Out: Śiva’s Game of Dice*. The myth I discuss is from the medieval puranic literature, from the *Kedarakhaṇḍa* (*Skandapurāṇa* 1.1.34-35, translated by David Shulman. For a fuller version of this myth, see Handelman & Shulman 1997: 17-20).

My argument is straightforward. Śiva and Pārvatī must fall apart in order to have the opportunity to come together as distinctly male and female. This seems tautological and self-evident. Yet it is processual and recursive. Moreover, once Śiva and Pārvatī fall apart, it is questionable whether they ever come together fruitfully and procreatively as husband and wife – not even for the first time. Their falling apart into sexual identities is fragmenting, as we will see, and they may never overcome this initial splitting. As the sexes come into being as distinctly separate – as they do in this myth – the engenderment of relatedness, of sociality, between them is immediately fraught with emergent tension that is generative in recursive

ways, but apparently is not fully solvable. What, then, might these processes tell us about the tacit premises of relatedness between the sexes, between husband and wife?

The Hindu cosmos within which this discussion takes shape is hierarchical and holistic (see Dumont 1970; Handelman 1987). The moments of creation – the moments within which hierarchical holism blossoms into being – shape and reverberate throughout the entirety of cosmic evolution. Such reverberation is a corollary of hierarchical holism, of the relationship between a whole and its parts, the parts (and their interrelationships) imbued with the qualities of the whole. When these moments of creation are those of fragmentation (as they are in the myth I discuss), then their resonances and echoes haunt this cosmos throughout its evolving existence. Thus, if the presence of Śiva and Pārvatī in these myths is that of role models for the relationship of male and female, husband and wife, then these are models of holism under threat, of union disrupted, and of eroticism enticed but hardly (or barely) consummated.

The premises that inform gender are crucial to its comprehension. Elsewhere I have argued, in relation to south Indian ritual materials, that the metaphysics of gender may be conceived of as a continuum. Engenderment in Hindu cosmic logics is frequently flexible, flowing, paradoxical, and self-transformative. Metaphysically, genders flow continuously into one another (Handelman 1995). This flowing continuum seems a fruitful locale in which to discern certain of the tacit premises that inform the formation of the distinctiveness of genders. So, too, the flowing continuum of gender may be disrupted and blocked – this may be related directly to the formation of sexual identities and their relatedness. Here the *Kedarakhaṇḍa* myth of Śiva and Pārvatī is useful.

At the outset of this myth, Śiva has the form of the androgyne (*Ardhanārīśvara*). The androgyne is split incipiently into male and female; yet these are still united, holistically, as one. When the sage, Nārada, visits the androgyne on Mount Kailāśa, this being sits quietly, quiescent, not doing anything, not generative within itself. Kailāśa can be understood as the apex of this hierarchical cosmos, and, so, it is homologous with the figure of the holistic androgyne. At this level of cosmic integration there is no relationship between the sexes, since they are hardly engendered. The sexes flow into one another, each a half of the other, each not existing without the other. Relatedness requires distinction, difference, and separation. This myth is given over to the generation of gender through the formation of difference. One tacit premise in the formation of difference may be that this process depends on fragmentation; another is that such fragmentation may generate opposition and conflict. If this is so, as I will argue, then engendered relationships (including those between husband and wife) may be deeply problematic.

ŚIVA AND PĀRVATĪ PLAY DICE

Nārada saw the goddess occupying half of the god's body. Śiva asked Nārada what he wanted. The sage replied that he had come for a game of dice, adding that, 'the two of you are likely to find it more pleasing than making love.' The goddess, Pārvatī, said angrily, 'Watch how I play with Śiva, before your very eyes, today.' She seized the dice and started to play. Soon Śiva and Pārvatī were entirely absorbed in the game.

The dice game in India has a lengthy pedigree as a model of cosmic processes (Handelman & Shulman 1997: 32-37). That is, embedded in the vision and organization of the dice game are certain features of the cosmos, their stipulated interrelationships, and the intended effects of the game on the broader cosmos. Other features of cosmos are omitted from the dice game (see Handelman 1990 on modeling in the organization of ritual). Therefore the model contracts the cosmos. Thus, in this hierarchical cosmos, the model exists on a lower level of cosmic encompassment than does the cosmos that it models. The dice game models the cosmos as divided against itself – in other words, as a game in which players oppose one another. In this model of cosmos, there is neither space nor time within which, and through which, cosmic unity may be maintained or reproduced. The playing of the game activates the stipulated relationships embedded in the model, the game, and their effects on the cosmos. David Shulman and I argue that the processes activated by the dice game are often those of fragmentation and evolution.

At the outset of this myth, the dice game proffered by Nārada has precisely the effects that I attribute to tacit premises of the logic of this cosmos. Nārada seduces the androgyne – Śiva and Pārvatī fused as one – into playing dice. This requires an initial act of tearing apart, of separating into two competing players who are distinctly engendered as male and female by this rupture. Dicing, says Nārada, is even more fun for a couple than making love (and note that the androgyne is precisely that form of sexual existence in which it is impossible to make love). In order to play, Śiva and Pārvatī tear apart – from the holism of union into the fragmentation of separate sexual identities. More accurately, it seems that the Pārvatī half of the godhead angrily seizes the dice and begins to play. The female, coming into form, seizes the initiative. Rupturing herself from the unity of the androgyne – in effect, tearing apart the androgyne – Pārvatī forces Śiva into becoming the other player, her opponent. Thus, not only do Śiva and Pārvatī fall apart, but within the game they become opponents – they must compete with one another. In this cosmos, the processes of engenderment signify the coming into existence of opposition and conflict between the sexes.

In effect, Nārada entices the holistic but quiescent, higher-level androgyne into action. Yet, within the world of the game, the only relationship this couple has is

that of conflict. As noted, in this hierarchical universe, the dice game exists on a lower level of cosmic encompassment than does the androgyne. Once the game has begun, there seems no escape from the effects of its outcome on the players. The outcome, integral to this model of game, is that one player will triumph, and the other lose. In this model of cosmos, Śiva *always* loses (or the game is destroyed, with the same outcome for the cosmos that is modelled by the game). In other words, the model of the dice game excludes the possibility that its outcome will reinstate the androgyne as the cosmic encompassment. Once Śiva enters the dice game (often reluctantly, against his will, as happens apparently in this myth), the cosmos will evolve through devolution. Pārvatī will win the game, and the cosmos will further devolve and therefore evolve.

The model of the dice game is intimately related to the creation of distinct and separate genders. It is also worth noting that, to my knowledge, Śiva never refuses to play the dice game, despite the imminence of his loss. Once the game is professed, or is underway, he is sucked into playing. In other words, he cannot maintain his encompassment of the cosmos against lower-level forces that continuously imbalance the godhead. The dice game inevitably drives the cosmos towards loss.

Śiva won the first rounds of the game. Then Pārvatī raised the stakes, and Śiva said he was prepared to wager various of his personal ornaments (in other words, various of his aspects of godhead) – his crescent moon, his necklace, and two earrings. Now Pārvatī won, and demanded that Śiva hand over what he had staked. Śiva smiled and refused: ‘I wasn’t really beaten by you, dearest; look at things from the right perspective. No living being can ever overcome me. You shouldn’t talk like this. Play dice as much as you want – I will always win.’

Pārvatī replied, ‘I did beat you. There is nothing surprising about that.’ She took him by the hand, and repeated: ‘There is simply no doubt about it – you have lost. You just don’t realize it.’

Still Śiva refused to pay up. ‘You speak out of egoism; please reconsider.’ Pārvatī laughed; ‘It is quite true – there is no one who can beat the great god – except me. I have won at this immaculate game.’

Nārada and Bhṛṅgin broke into the quarrel. Nārada said to the goddess: ‘You are speaking nonsense; you are talking about the supreme lord of the universe and its inner being, invincible, formless, formed and beyond form. How could you beat him? You do not know Śiva, since you are only a woman.’

This infuriated Pārvatī. ‘Shut up,’ she screamed; ‘your fickle and unstable nature makes you talk like this. Śiva was born through my grace, born and set securely in his place.’

Nārada fell silent, but Bhṛṅgin spoke up: ‘You should not talk so much. Our lord is not given to mutation, but you are yoked to a feminine state. You came to Śiva after giving in to Desire; don’t you remember how Śiva burnt away Desire’s body, and burnt the forest on the Mountain that is your father?’ Both Pārvatī and

Bhṛṅgin became increasingly enraged as they continued to argue. Bhṛṅgin stressed that, 'There is nothing higher than Śiva in the cosmos, and you should make an effort to feel affection for him.' For her part, Pārvatī cursed Bhṛṅgin to be without flesh (he is often depicted as skeletal, without the feminine substance of flesh); and she dared Śiva to intervene.

As the dice game progresses, the balance of power shifts. Śiva is initially victorious, but then Pārvatī triumphs. Indeed, two realities clash. In one, that of the cosmos outside of the game, Śiva is the cosmic encompassment, the godhead, and is invincible. In the other, emerging from within the life of the game, the modelled cosmos, Śiva is diminished, loses his powers and capacities, while Pārvatī emerges triumphant. The clash of realities is also a test of the power of the game to impact on the broader cosmos.

Śiva perceives the cosmos to encompass and to subsume the dice game. From this perspective, the game is merely an aspect of the cosmos that is Śiva. Śiva believes that he determines the outcomes of the game, just as he determines the doings of his cosmos. Śiva cannot believe he has lost the game, since in his cosmos he is unbeatable. In this perception, Śiva is supported by the other males who are present. For her part, Pārvatī experiences the dice game as the encompassing (if contracted) reality, filling all time and space. In this reality she bests Śiva. And it is this reality – shaping difference and distance, engendering, forming division and separation – that alienates and distances the sexes from one another. Males and female divide utterly and totally oppose one another. But the reality of the game is the dominant one.

Śiva did not reply to Pārvatī's dare. Then Pārvatī removed with her hand various attributes of Śiva, of Śiva's cosmic encompassment – the snake, Vāsuki, that Śiva wore around his neck, the crescent moon, the elephant's hide, the serpents, Kambala and Aśvatara, and, finally, tricking him with words, his loincloth. Bhṛṅgin and the other servants averted their eyes in shame. Śiva, too, was ashamed and spoke in hostile tones to Pārvatī: 'All of the sages, along with Brahmā and Viṣṇu, are laughing at this joke. What have you done? You were born in a good family. If you know for a fact that you beat me, then at least give me back my loincloth.'

Pārvatī merely laughed. 'Why do you need a loincloth?', she asked. 'When you went into the Pine Forest, beguiling the wives of the sages, pretending to beg for alms, you were clothed only in space. You were such a pure, rarefied sage. Those sages worshiped you, and they made your loincloth fall, so you might as well let it go. After all, I won it at dice.'

Pārvatī strips Śiva of the properties of his cosmic encompassment, and he does not resist. Indeed, he seems helpless, diminished, in the face of her dominance. Only when utterly naked, does he respond, and then his tone is hostile yet pleading. His self-confidence, his earlier claim that he is unbeatable, has vanished. He is full of uncertainty as he says to Pārvatī, 'If you know for a fact that you beat me...' As the cosmic encompassment, Śiva has total clarity of perception and the total know-

ledge of everything, in all tenses, that accompanies this perception. But now he no longer knows, and he depends on her judgement. From within the dice game she knows; he does not. Yet she is replete with triumph, mocking his feeble efforts to retrieve his loincloth, contrasting his previous strength to his present helplessness.

Śiva was so enraged that he opened his third eye and directed it at Pārvatī. Still she went on smiling [and said]: 'Why are you so intent on staring at me? I am not Death, or Desire, or Dakṣa's sacrifice, or the Triple City, or Andhaka. Why bother with this blazing gaze? It is all for nothing that you are becoming *Virūpākṣa* – 'Ugly Eyes' – in front of me.'

Śiva is roused to engage perhaps his most potent and deadly weapon, his third eye whose deadly gaze burns to ash all who stand before him. Now his gaze is aimed at his wife. Indeed, Pārvatī lists some of the major enemies of Śiva whom he defeated, but she does not desist, as she contrasts the triumphs of his gaze with her own imperviousness. Śiva is impotent before her onslaught. Just as his loss in the dice game diminishes his positioning within the hierarchical organization of cosmos, so her positioning rises, relative to his decline.

As she went on in this vein, Śiva began to think about going away to some deserted place, where a man could be happy by himself – free, devoid of attachments, his thoughts under control, beyond desire and passion, aware of ultimate truths; in short, both happy and wise. So he left her and went to the Siddha wilderness. His companions – Bhṛṅgin, Vīrabhadra, Nandin – followed him, but soon he sent them away and continued alone. Pārvatī, for her part, went into the women's quarters, in a foul mood.

Unable to stand up to her, Śiva runs away from Pārvatī, into the wilderness, into emptiness where he may be able to expand and reconstitute himself through himself. Beginning as the holistic androgyne, Śiva and Pārvatī, fully engendered – one may say, hardened – through the opposition and conflict of the dice game, have fallen apart, far away from one another. The effect of the dice game is to destroy the relationship between the spouses, even as relatedness potentially comes into existence from the split androgyne.

Pārvatī was tormented by this separation and found no joy anywhere. She thought only about Śiva. Her attendant, Vijayā, said to her, 'You won Śiva by self-mortification; it was wrong to play dice with him. Haven't you heard that dicing is full of flaws? You should forgive him. Go quickly, before he is too far away, and appease him. If you don't, you will be sorry later.' Pārvatī replied, entirely truthfully: 'I won against that shameless man; and I chose him, before, for my lover. Now there is nothing I must do. Without me he is formless; for him, there can be no separation from, or conjunction with, me. I have made him formed or formless, as the case may be, just as I have created this entire universe with all its gods. I just wanted to play with him, for fun, for the sake of the game, in order to play with the causes of his emerging into activity.'

Pārvatī took the form of a tribal woman [*śabarī*], dark and lovely, with bright red lips, a splendid neck, a curvaceous body staggering under the weight of two magnificent breasts, her waist thin but hips and thighs fleshy and golden, with bangles on her arms and peacock feathers in her hair. Carrying a bow in her hands, a quiver on her back, she seemed to be reviving Desire, while the very bees and peacocks in that wilderness were overpowered by love.

Despite her ascendancy, Pārvatī longs for Śiva. In this there is a thrust on her part towards re-union between these engendered, distinct, and firmly shaped forms. A thrust not only towards sociality and closeness, but also towards the erasure of difference, including that of gender. A thrust back towards more of a continuum of flow among gender identities. In order to attract Śiva, Pārvatī disguises herself as a luscious untouchable woman. But in this there is also something of a test, perhaps to see to what degree Śiva has recovered his holistic clarity of vision and his total knowledge of his cosmos. And, too, whether Śiva can accomplish his return to holism without Pārvatī's presence.

Pārvatī went to where Śiva was sitting, deep in meditation on the Self, his eyes closed – he who is one and many, without limit, fashioned only from his own understanding. Confused by the humming of the bees, he woke up and saw her, and wanted her. As he reached for her hand, she vanished. Now Śiva, Destroyer of Desire, was overcome, in his turn, by the pain of separation; he who knows no delusion was overcome by delusion. He called to her, 'Who are you, and to whom do you belong? Why are you wandering in this wilderness?'

She said, 'I am looking for a husband who is omniscient, who fulfills all needs, who is free and without mutations, the lord of the worlds.'

Śiva said, 'That's me! I'm the right husband for you. Think it over.'

The Śabarī agreed. 'Yes, you are the husband I have been seeking. But I have to tell you – you are lacking in virtue. A woman won you long ago by intense mortifications, yet you abandoned her in a flash, in the wilderness. You're hard to like, and you shouldn't say what you just said to me.'

Śiva replied, 'I didn't abandon that woman. Or if I did – what can I say today? Even knowing this wretchedness of mine, you should still do as I say.' As the Śabarī continued to keep him at arm's length, Śiva pressed his courtship. Though, as Pārvatī, she consented to marry him, he left again after Nārada reappeared, telling Śiva that, 'Union with women always leads to mockery for men.' Śiva later was persuaded to return to her.

Meditating alone in the wilderness, Śiva is attracted out of his own depths to the Śabarī. His ascetic attempt at self-regeneration cannot withstand her erotic presence. Yet Pārvatī's disguise holds. Śiva's perception is still diminished as a result of the dice game. He does not see beneath the surface of the identity of the woman before him. Indeed, he courts the Śabarī. She plays with him, stating her terms: she seeks a husband who is omniscient. Śiva in his diminishment is clearly not this, but

he insists he is. She reminds him of how Pārvaṭī won him by intense mortifications, and yet he abandoned her 'in a flash.' Śiva has no answer, save his desire for the Śabarī. Nonetheless, Nārada persuades him to leave Pārvaṭī once more, on the grounds that men always suffer from union with women. Though he returns to Pārvaṭī, their cosmic relationship seems inherently unstable; and it is continually disrupted by dice games and other forms of play, through which Śiva and his cosmos are diminished over and again (Handelman & Shulman 1997).

Perhaps another index of the unease that characterizes their relationship is that all their children are always offspring of either one or the other parent, either pro-created wholly by Śiva or by Pārvaṭī (for example, Andhaka [Handelman & Shulman 1997], Murugan [Handelman 1987], Vīrabhadra, Gaṇeśa, and so forth). Thus, even as they reunite after falling apart, it is questionable whether this joining is ever truly generative and fruitful as a family of procreation. The very processes that tear them apart also prevent their fruitful joining. That is, the very act that rends the androgyne – the move into the dice game – is cosmogonic in its own right. But this act – one that creates distinct and separate genders – is itself embedded in the ongoing destabilization that is generated by the dice game and other forms of play. The holism of the androgyne (and, one may say, of this cosmos) is never again attained.

One should remember that Śiva plays dice reluctantly. He enters the dice game because he is forced to. In his attitude there is the intimation of his own self-destruction as a holistic being, a holistic cosmos, through the game, even though this very process is also his self-activation. He does not desire this self-dismemberment. And the act of rending to create difference continues to reverberate throughout the evolution of this hierarchical cosmos, reproducing instabilities between the genders on all cosmic levels. The dice game, in particular, is heavily colored by anger, antagonism, and the experience of separation. The game activates a process through which the female takes the male apart. The separation into gender is joined to conflict between the sexes. This is never fully overcome again. Put otherwise, this tearing apart into genders is also the devolution of the androgyne and, so, the activation and evolution of the cosmos.

Yet, too, these deities need one another. As Pārvaṭī says in this myth, she imparts form to Śiva, and propels him through transformations without reference to his own wishes. Apart from her – an ascetic in the wilderness – he utterly desires her disguised as the seductive Śabarī. And she, apart from him (in the harem), longs for his presence. Nonetheless, even as they come together at the close of this myth, the tension of separation into genders remains entirely unresolved. The conclusion feels almost artificial, a moment of tranquil togetherness that is fixed as an idealistic and ideal ending in which the couple live happily ever after (see also Handelman 1987, for a parallel argument with regard to Murugan and his two wives).

THE CONSEQUENCES OF ENGENDERMENT

Within the continuum of gender, sexual identities flow through the shape of the androgyne, without acquiring distinctiveness and firmness. Moreover, in the myth discussed here, the forming of sexual identities is traumatic. The flow of gender is dammed abruptly as the androgyne is ripped apart, in accordance with the parameters of the dice game. As this occurs, the blocked flow of gender hardens suddenly into distinctive sexual identities that are opposed to one another, each perhaps missing some quality of being that the other possesses. There is something of a paradox in this process of the creation of sexual identities within the continuum of gender. Sexual identities are crucial to a marriage relationship and to its sociality. Yet, the very act that brings these identities into being also destroys the sociality of their relatedness to one another, thereby putting the relationship itself into question.

In the course of this myth, Śiva and Pārvatī acquire sexual identities. This is the crux of their relationship as husband and wife. But, as I noted above, their relationship is necessarily pervaded with tension and uncertainty. The generation of their sexual identities is fraught with a metaphysic of ongoing imbalance, of falling apart in order to come together, yet of continually failing in this, and consequently of embedding instability within the marriage relationship. Thus, the traumatic origins of Śiva and Pārvatī within the continuum of gender continually exert its force on them, preventing their fruitful union.

The tacit premises that inform the creation of distinct genders in this cosmology are, I think, as I stated them at the outset. The formation of difference depends on a fragmentation that is destructive of holism. Fragmentation generates opposition and conflict. Opposition and conflict between genders are embedded within their marriage relationship. Therefore the marriage relationship is deeply problematic in its metaphysical foundations.

Through the evolution of cosmos, from the holism of androgynous sexual identity through the formation of distinct, fragmented sexual identities, the world of human beings looms into view. The metaphysics of relationship in the human world are of even more hardened sexual identities. In order for husband and wife to form a fruitfully procreative union, the ontological continuum of gender is shattered even further. The corollary of this is that opposition and conflict are embedded even deeper in the sociality of the marriage relationship among human beings than they are in the marriage relationship among deities.

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