

Nataraja and the Indian Classical Dance

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Abstract

Nataraja is one of the manifestations of the Hindu God of destruction, Shiva. It is the anthropomorphic dancing image of Shiva which symbolises the cosmic dance- the dance of life, i.e. the creation, preservation and destruction of the Universe. His dance blends all binaries into each other, consuming all opposites of the Universe. The present paper discusses the role and purpose of dance in representing this mythological phenomenon of creation and liberation. It also sheds light on the interpretation of the *Nāṭya Śāstra* of the masculine and feminine energies in dancing.

Keywords: Classical dance; Indian; Liberation; Myth; *Nataraja*.

Indian traditions of dance can be traced back to antiquity. The remains that passed down to us from the times of the Indus valley civilisation indicate the strong association of dance, religion and culture. Among many other artefacts was found a sculpture of a deity in a dancing posture- *Nataraja*, the archetypal dancer (Kothari 70). Although the sculpture was found dismantled, it is not much different from the *Nataraja* images of later times.

Nataraja is one of the manifestations of the Hindu God of destruction, Shiva. Such symbols and symbolic figures can be found in abundance in India. The life strength of these symbols is endless since it is carried forward by an ancient civilisation like India. These symbols can remain alive for centuries. They may sometimes fade away and die with changes in traditions but are born again like a phoenix from its ashes. This way the river of tradition keeps flowing.



Nataraja (Fig. 1)

<https://spicerange.com/products/large-brass-nataraja-statue>

The most common object of worship in Shiva temples is the phallus or *liṅgam*. Historically, this form of deity can be dated back to the neolithic ages (Zimmer 126). The *liṅgam*, which depicts the male creative energy, is combined with the female creative energy- the *yoni*. The *yoni* forms the base through which the *liṅgam* emerges. Together the two energies create the Universe. The converge of the two opposing forces symbolises the conflicting yet cooperating entities united to beget and nurture life. This manifestation of Shiva is considered as the “immovable” (*dhruva*) one. Other anthropomorphic forms are called “movable” (*cala*). One of the *cala* forms of Shiva is the dancing image, i.e. *Nataraja*. It symbolises the cosmic dance- the dance of life, i.e. the creation, preservation and destruction of the universe. The dance of Shiva represents liberation of the soul from the cycle of birth and death. His dance blends all binaries into each other,

consuming all opposites of the Universe (Narayanan 208).

The dancing image of *Nataraja* is represented as Shiva dancing with four arms, one foot raised and locks of hair afloat in the air. His hair is braided and embellished. An anthropomorphic figure of goddess Ganga who is one of his consorts sits on his head, where a crescent moon also rests. It is crowned with a wreath of cassia leaves. His right ear is adorned with a man's earring while in his left ear he wears a woman's earring which denotes his half man - half woman form called *ardhanārīśwara*. The *ardhanārīśwara* represents the cosmos which is constituted by equal parts of man and woman. His body is jewelled with necklaces, bangles, armlets, a belt, anklets, finger and toe-rings. He wears a pair of tight-fitting breeches, a fluttering scarf and a sacred thread. The snake around his neck represents the paradox of evil tendencies and the life force of *kundalini* residing within the human being. One right hand is lifted in the posture of protection while with one left hand he points towards the lifted left foot which indicates liberation from illusion. One right hand holds the *damrū* which is the drum he plays while creating and regulating the universe. It is believed that sound or vibration is the root of the Creation. Paradoxically, one left hand holds a flame which denotes the power of destruction of the universe.

The juxtaposition of creation and destruction, protection and emancipation, male and female, reflect the omnipotence and omnipresence of Shiva. The cosmos is an image of Shiva himself, who is the master of all forces of the universe. A dwarf demon, Apasmara, is trampled beneath his right foot on the ground. The demon personifies ego and ignorance which he keeps under control. The image of *Nataraja* is encircled by a ring of fire, a halo-like structure fringed with flames. This circle is called *prabhā mandala* which represents the cyclical nature of time. Within that cycle, Shiva performs his play or *līlā* of creation and destruction ("Aldous" 00:35-01:17). There are five aspects of Shiva depicted in this dance- *sṛsti* (creation and evolution), *sthiti* (preservation and maintenance), *samhāra* (destruction), *tirobhāva* (illusion) and *anugraha* (release and salvation).

Why was dance chosen for this representation of life, death and liberation? Why not any other art form like music, poetry, painting, sculpting, cooking, knitting, etc.? I believe it was because for dancing, the dancer must be physically present and visible. Other art forms can stand by themselves and be enjoyed without seeing the artist. However, in dancing, the dancer must be present and visible in the moment. This represents the inseparable nature of the Creator and the Creation. Creation cannot be

without the Creator and vice versa. Dr. Ananda K. Coomarswamy states, "How supremely great in power and grace this dancing image must appear to all those who have striven in plastic forms to give expression to their intuition of Life!" (7). Dance is a form of liberation. It gives the artist not only a means of expression but also an outlet for their emotions, thoughts and ideas. It is a physical as well as mental, emotional and spiritual phenomenon. Thus, to represent life, death and liberation, dance is an apt choice of art form.

The Nāṭya Śāstra of Bharata (3rd c. BC) describes two kinds of dancing, namely *tāndava* and *lāsya*. *Tāndava* is the dance of Shiva, which was first performed by Tanduv by employing various *angahāras* and *karavas* (1.4.265). *Lāsya* is the dance of his consort, goddess Parvati, which is but a gentler form of *tāndava* (1.4.273). *Lāsya* relates to the erotic sentiment which Bharata named *śrngāra rasa* (1.6.15). *Tāndava* is the dance of rage and violence, fired by fierce explosion of the wrath of destruction. It depicts masculine energy. *Lāsya*, on the other hand, is the dance of grace and tenderness, representing the feminine energy. Shiva, being the Lord of Dance, is the master of both.

In conclusion, it can be observed that the dance of Shiva is a combination of all the forces of the world. It continues to inspire Indian artists from different fields and genres, for example, dancing, painting, sculpting and so on. *Nataraja* depicts dance as a force of life and liberation. Shiva and Parvati are the archetypal parents of the world. According to Hindu mythology, they begot the Universe together. It is believed that all the classical dance forms like Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, etc. originated from these two kinds of dance. In ancient times, dance was rooted in temples and was considered as an offering to God. The dancer-actors reckoned themselves as the devotees of God. Dance becomes a means of the soul (*ātma*) to be unified with the Absolute (*brahma*).

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