

# Siva Nataraja: An Essay

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Humans are creators of "things." Those things can be categorized into sounds, movements, and objects. While all "things" created are derived from and reflective of the human mind at work, objects give the most insight into the mind. Creating objects requires a manner of human involvement that is dependent upon the most complex and "human" characteristics of the mind. The most important characteristic is the employment of a specific structuring of material reflecting a technology expertise gained only by "learning." The objects created give tangible and immutable evidence of the technology and learning necessary for their creation. The objects most reflective of the workings of the human mind are those that are sub-categorized as "art" objects.

Humans of all eras and areas create objects that fit into their own version of the category of "art," and all of those objects have remarkable similarities in their forms. That is, the shapes, with their internal structure and the manner in which they are placed together in specific configuration of objects--of all eras and areas have a marked tangible similarity. Conversely, each set of objects from every specific social/cultural envelope has distinctly different aspects of *application* of form (shape with internal structure in configuration) and use and function. Thus, a peculiar balance between similarity and difference allows for a concept of "style" for each set of objects created. When all objects created designated as art are considered, it is also apparent another strong similarity exists.

Art historians have noted that social/cultural envelopes that are chronologically coherent display close style similarities in the art objects they contain. It has also been noted those similarities are consistent within those of other periods and groups in similar states of existence. Thus stylistic periods are noted and designated, and Paleolithic, Neolithic and Tribal Arts are differentiated from Ancient Art, Classical Art, Renaissance Art and so on. It is also noted that one social/cultural envelope may intrude its "style" onto another, either through development in quantum steps or by pervasive intrusion. Thus in certain places (for unknown reasons) the style changes perceptibly

over long or short periods of time. The changes in the Ancient Styles of Egypt over four millennia were small, while those in Greek Art were very great in a comparatively short time. In some instances, it is apparent that stylistic characteristics are similar through a perceived principle of "parallelism." This principle depends upon human tendencies to structure similar forms when similar technology is involved. There is also a perceived parallelism in application of forms that, speculatively, result from the human similarities in cognitive process: a circle looks like the sun everywhere. There is an assumption that styles that are long-lived and chronologically continuous are changed through invasive and oppressive means by intrusive exterior styles.

It is apparent that long-lived chronologically continuous styles develop the most consistent presentations of form in terms of configuration, use, and function. Conversely, it is to be expected that a form that is strong and consistent in its configuration, use, and function should be evidence of long chronological continuity and cultural importance. Such a form would seem to be a most important piece of language reflective of the human minds responsible for its creation. It would give a particular and peculiar insight into the mind of the culture and the individuals responsible for its structuring.

One of the longest lived cultural structures of the world is that of India. One of the most powerful and important forms created in that culture in a consistent style is the figure of one of its major gods, Siva. The most often presented object is that of Siva dancing the Nadanta as Lord of the Dance; the figure of Siva Nataraja.

The image presented in Plate 1 is that of Siva Nataraja. It is a bronze object of significant size and detailed finish and is a testament to the technology developed in India for casting bronze into representational images of great realistic specificity. That technology indicates the very high level of the artistry of the social/cultural period reached in India by the tenth century. It was a technology of long tradition and attainment seldom equaled in the world until modern times. It is a singular evidence of a long gestational period preceding its production and of the high valuation by the culture of the image cast.





Plate 1. Siva Nataraja, Lord of Dance. C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974). Figure 89. Chapter 13, Nataraja, early Chola, 1000 A.D., Tiruvalangadu, Madras Museum (p. 237).

The object depicts the image of Siva in the dance called the Nadanta. He is performing a step or phase of that dance, the iconography of which is well chronicled. Each element of the dance is explicit in detail and the separate aspects of the configuration of the dance, the step, the attributes, the symbols, and the condition of the figure are carefully and realistically presented. There can be no doubt the artist or artists responsible for the making of the figure depict the reality of a human male figure dressed in specific regalia in a particular dance configuration. The general rhythmic character of the means of depicting the figure reflects the cadence of a graceful dance. Thus, the image presents a depiction of the naturalistic aspects of a real human dancing and, one suspects, from a model or direct observation of the act in process. On the other hand, the artist also presents an obvious abstract conventionalization of reality in several elements of the

depiction. The four arms are not depictions of a natural human condition. The general configuration of the human figure standing with one foot raised and with the figure of a small dwarf-like person under the other foot, are rather obvious aspects of abstract conventionalization of reality to create part of the symbolism of the object. The most important symbolic aspects of the object are attached to the dancing figure itself.

Siva is the Lord of the Dance in the pantheon of gods of Hindu India. He has many dances for all occasions and reigns supreme as the preeminent dancer. His other functions within that pantheon of gods all accrue to his position as the great dancer and musician. Music and dance in the past formed (and still forms) an important aspect of the spiritual and religious character of the Hindu religion. They also form an important aesthetic element in the spiritual life of India. Of the two, dance was and is the most important. Together, music and dance constitute a major element of the *vidyas* of life itself. Thus Siva, as the Lord of the Dance and as the major musician, becomes an image of extreme importance to the whole social-cultural Indian envelope.

Dance as an aesthetic medium is as three-dimensional as sculpture. Dance itself derives its aesthetic base directly from the human body reacting with structured movements in response to music and texts of songs. The movements follow specifically choreographed movement patterns that exist in three-dimensional space and four-dimensional time. The sculpture of Siva Nataraja is a moment of that four-dimensional dance frozen in dynamic stasis, but implying (by its depictive nature) the whole of the dance. The sculpture's form reflects that of an actual dance and while it is a dance from the far past of tradition, it is still "modern" in its connotation of movement dynamics. The dance represented, the *Nadanta*, was and is an art form of the highest level in the axiological systems of Indian aesthetics. It contains the same kinds of emotional devices and high intensity images as present-day MTV presentations. The close parallels in both form and content existing between these two artistic forms are even more striking since they are so disparate in time.

Unlike modern forms, the *Nadanta* and all other Hindu dances follow carefully traditional conventionalized choreographed movement patterns and forms. The traditions are based in ancient historic/mythological writings and the dynamic forms are based on primordial configurations. The music and texts that accompany the dance are simple and elegant in form and primary in source and technology. The



structure and configuration of movement, pose, pattern, and visual placement are complex and sophisticated while reflecting their primordial base and traditional antecedents.

Dance in general was an extremely important stimulus and prototype for sculpture to follow. Sculpture became the dance in frozen form and the Hindu pantheon of gods, major and minor, are all depicted in dance. Siva, Brahma, and Vishnu are the gods most often represented in sculptures depicting the dancing Hindu Pantheon. But always, it is Siva who is thought of and represented as the central dancing figure. In the depiction of Three Natyacharyas from the twelfth century (Plate 2), Siva dances in the center while Brahma is on the left and Vishnu is on the right.



Plate 2. Three Natyacharyas; Siva (center), Brahma (left), Vishnu (right) C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974). Figure 2, Chapter Three, Kakatiya, 12th Century A.D., Warahgal, National Museum (p. 26).

Siva has many roles in the Hindu system. He is the great musician and in that character He is the great teacher and the person who sets the rhythm for the dance and the universe. He often is depicted with Gangas, playing musical instruments as (so to speak) both the leader and principal musician of the band of players (Plate 3). The band often plays for Siva as He assumes the role of dancer. There are hundreds of dances He performs as the great dancer. He dances as the great conqueror, Siva Ardhanarisvara, with one foot on the Nandi

Bull and one foot on a lion (Plate 4). He dances in caves as depicted in cave number one Badami, Mysore from the eighth century (Plate 5). He dances as the great Androgyne with his consort Paravati, a skeleton and the Nandi Bull (Plate 6). He dances with Matrikas (Plate 7) in a unison concert. A great part of Siva's existence is spent in dance.



Plate 3. Siva as Musician with Gangas sounding musical instruments. C. Sivaramurti, *Satarudriya: Vibhuti of Siva's Iconography* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976). Figure 58. Siva *saptasvara-maya*, Vakataka, 5th century A.D., Parel near Bombay.



Plate 4. Siva dancing with one foot on the Nandi Bull the other on a lion, C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974). Figure 3, Chapter 8. Terra-cotta, 13th century A.D., Rani Pokri, Kathmandu, Nepal (p. 91).

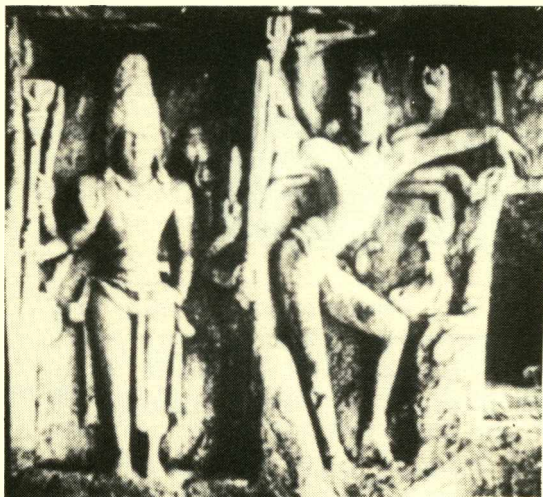


Plate 5. Siva dancing. 6th c., C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974). Figure 16, Chapter Thirteen, Multi-armed Siva Dancing, early Pallava, 6th Century, A.D., Bhairavakonda Cave, Nellore Dist. (p. 178).



Plate 6. Siva Androgyne, wearing snakes, with Nandi, Paravati, and skeleton, 6th c. Slide collection, Western Washington University.





Plate 7. Matrikas dancing with Siva, right side of wall panel including Siva at right. C. Sivaramamurti, *Satarudriya: Vibhuti of Siva's Iconography* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976). Figure 31. Matrikas dancing flanked to the right by Siva, Gurjara-Pratihara, 10th century A.D., National Museum.

Siva performs three major dances of great importance to the structure and fabric of the Hindu religion. While the other dances are generally celebratory in nature, these three specific dances are connected directly to the core of Hindu religion and spirituality. They carry deep significance and give great insight into the origins of the traditions of all India and, most important, to the aesthetics, significance, and meaning of Siva and His dances to the social and cultural life of India itself.

One dance of importance is an evening dance in the Himalayas, with a divine chorus, described as follows in the *Shiva Pradosha Stotra*:

Placing the Mother of the Three Worlds upon a golden throne, studded with precious gems, Shulapani dances on the heights of Kailasa, and all the gods gather round him:

Saravati plays on the vina, Indra on the flute, Brahma holds the time-marking cymbals, Lakshmi begins a song, Vishnu plays on a drum, and all the gods stand round about:

Gandharvas, Yakshas, Paragas, Uragas, Siddhas, Sadhyas, Vidya-dharas, Amaras, Apsarases, and all the beings dwelling in the three worlds assemble there to witness the celestial dance and hear the music of the divine choir at the hour of twilight.<sup>1</sup>

This may be the dance scene showing Siva dancing between Brahma and Vishnu depicted on the lintel (Plate 2). It is an entertainment dance in which all partake. It brings to mind images of primordial tribal enclaves in ritual as well as scenes that still occur at family gatherings in places like Greece and Turkey.

The next dance of importance is called:

. . . the *Tandava*, and belongs to His *tamasic* aspect as Bhairava or Virabhadra. It is performed in cemeteries and burning grounds, where Shiva, usually in ten-armed form, dances wildly with Devi, accompanied by troops of capering imps. Representations of this dance are common amongst ancient sculptures, as at Elura, Elephanta, and also Bhuvaneshvara. The *Tandava* dance is in origin that of a pre-Aryan divinity, half-god, half-demon, who holds His midnight revels in the burning grounds. In later times, this dance in the cremation grounds, sometimes of Shiva, sometimes of Devi, is interpreted in Shaiva and Shakta literature in a most touching and profound sense.<sup>2</sup>

The Tandava dance is a most important element in the Hindu scheme of things and requires attention not possible here, for it is the third dance that is the subject of this paper. The third dance of Siva and His most important one is the Nadanta, as depicted by the Siva Nataraja. It is the most often depicted image in all Indian sculpture. In its complete depiction the Nadanta shows Siva in His most powerful manifestation (Plate 8).

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<sup>1</sup> Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Siva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1985), pp. 56-57.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.



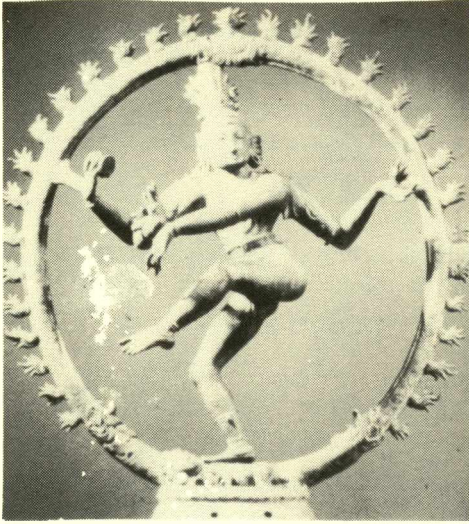


Plate 8. Siva Nataraja, 11th  
c. Cleveland Museum.

The thousands of depictions of Siva Nataraja in stone and bronze indicate its popularity and importance as an image. The object depicted in Plate 8 is done with consummate skill and mastery of the technology. It is the standard general height for this specific depiction, 43.5 inches, and was done during the high period of accomplishment for Indian bronze casting, the Chola period (about 1075-1100). The image's popularity and the artist's consummate technical skill combine to make this bronze figure the perfect example of an object with strong sign quality and deep significance for the social/cultural envelope of its origin. As a result it has deep, abiding and emotional meaning and impact on all individuals of the Hindu faith and, indeed, for all Indians.

The bronze image depicts Siva Nataraja, the Lord of the Dance, performing in Chidambaram. He is a beautifully sensuous figure of fine physique delineated by the artist with a strong sense of three-dimensional volume and precisely defined shape and configuration. He is four-armed, with each arm posed so as to enhance the significance of the dance as well as dynamically balance the figure with the bronze circle surrounding it. The circle is a ring that sprouts flames at precise and measured intervals along its outer edge. Siva stands on one foot within the ring. Beneath this foot lies a dwarf called Apasmara or Mu-yalaka who, in turn, holds a cobra. Siva's other foot is raised in a graceful pose and one hand points directly at it. The body of Siva is adorned by many objects, all of which have specific and particular sign

quality within a system of symbolism well documented and known to those living in its social/cultural environment.

The object presents the image of Siva as pre-eminent God of the Hindu pantheon in the dance, through which He arises to that position and becomes Lord of the Universe. In the dance and as a result of it, Siva assumes the aspects and responsibilities of all the gods and, thereby controls the fate of the cosmos. As a result the dance is the act which controls all destiny and particularly human destiny. The bronze image depicts the controlling actor in charge of all existence in the act of receiving and exerting absolute control.

. . . So stupendous is the concept of the Lord of Dance, Nataraja, so completely enveloping the Universe, in which and as which He dances, an impossible situation indeed, where He is both the container and the contained.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the meaning of the dancing image arises from the source and origin of the dance. The source and origin are recounted in the writing called *Koyil Puranam* which presents the old mythic telling of the dance as it took place. Coomaraswamy, in *Dance of Shiva*, tells us

. . . The Nadanta dance or Nataraja [takes place] before the assembly (Sabha) in the Golden Hall of Chidambaram or Tillai, the center of the Universe [was] first revealed to gods and rishis after the submission of the latter in the forest of Taragam. . . .

. . . In the forest of Taragam dwelt multitudes of heretical rishis, following the Mimamsa. Thither proceeded Shiva to confute them, accompanied by Vishnu disguised as a beautiful woman, and Ati-Sheshan. The rishis were at first led to violent dispute amongst themselves, but their anger was soon directed against Shiva, and they endeavored to destroy Him by means of incantations. A fierce tiger was created in sacrificial fires, and rushed upon Him; but smiling gently, He seized it and with the nail of His little finger, stripped off its skin and wrapped it about Himself like a silken cloth. Undiscouraged by failure, the sages renewed their offerings, and produced a monstrous serpent, which however, Shiva seized and wreathed about His neck like a garland. Then He began to dance; but there rushed upon Him a last monster in the shape of a malignant dwarf, Muyalaka. Upon Him the God pressed the tip of His foot, and broke the creature's back, so that it writhed upon the ground; and so,

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<sup>3</sup> C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974), p. 3.



His last foe prostrate, Shiva resumed the dance, witnessed by gods and rishis. Then, Ati-Sheshan worshipped Shiva and prayed above all things for the boon, once more to behold this mystic dance; Shiva promised that He should behold the dance again in sacred Tillai, the center of the Universe.<sup>4</sup>

It is the image of that dance, begun under the conditions stated in the forest of Taragam and then, as promised, performed again in Tillai, that provides the subject for literally thousands of objects depicting Siva Nataraja. It is not difficult to interpret the myth as the point in time when Siva accomplishes three important objectives. The first was the act of overcoming what in ancient times could be considered insurmountable obstacles. Tigers, huge snakes, malignant beings--all the result of magic--were symbolic presentations of real dangers. Siva, overcoming those things in the act of "dance," would be, symbolically, a marvelous superhuman feat. The second was the overcoming of the heretical rishis or sages. The symbolism of such a conquest is debatable but must indicate Siva's successful conquering of a powerful, magical group who intended to do him grievous harm. Such a conquest must signify Siva's ascending to a power position in some social/cultural sense within a specific environment, now projected mystically but at some origin point providing a very real human political content for the dance. The third was the starting and continuing, against all odds, of a "dance" that was so powerful that it was to be performed again and continually so that it became an image of power and persistence into modern times and throughout the modern world.

To Indians, most specifically to those of Hindu faith, the dance had specific significance and as a result particular meaning. That significance and meaning came directly from the image itself. Each separate image of Siva, in his several manifestations, dances, avatars, or compositions had its own significance and meaning different from the Nataraja. Of all those images, Nataraja is the most important and the most revealing about Siva, both as a god and as an historical element. A superficial look at those signs and symbols, and what they meant, indicates the image's importance. Coomaraswamy, in his *Dance of Shiva*, states:

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<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, Coomaraswamy, p. 4.

. . . The images, then, represent Shiva dancing, having four hands, with braided and jeweled hair of which the lower locks are whirling in the dance. In His hair may be seen a wreathing cobra, a skull, and the mermaid figure of Ganga; upon it rests the crescent moon, and it is crowned with a wreath of Cassia leaves. In His right ear He wears a man's earring, a woman's in the left; He is adorned with necklaces and armlets, a jeweled belt, anklets, bracelets, finger and toe rings. The chief part of His dress consists of tightly fitting breeches, and He wears also a fluttering scarf and a sacred thread. One right hand holds a drum, the other uplifted in the sign of do not fear: one left hand holds fire, the other points down upon the demon Myualaka, a dwarf holding a cobra; the left foot is raised. There is a lotus pedestal, from which springs an encircling glory (tiruvasi), fringed with flames, and touched within by the hands holding drum and fire.<sup>5</sup>

Some aspects described are Shiva's normal attributes that act as signs of his character and its meaning.

. . . Such are the braided locks, as of a yogi: the Cassia garland: the skull of Brahma: the figure of Ganga (the Ganges fallen from heaven and lost in Shiva's hair): the cobras: the different earrings, betokening the dual nature of Mahadev, "whose half is Uma": and the four arms. The drum also is a general attribute of Shiva, belonging to his character of yogi, though in the dance it has further a special significance.<sup>6</sup>

The general meaning of the Nadanta encompasses the five activities of Siva which are separately considered, the singular activities of Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheshvara and Sadashiva. Thus the dance is the sign that Siva now acts as do all of the other gods. In the dance, He becomes the culmination of all the activities of the separate gods and as such presents

. . . His five activities (Pancakritya), viz: Shrishti (over looking, creation, evolution), Sthiti (preservation, support), Samhara (destruction, evolution), Tirobhava veiling, emobidment, illusion, and also, giving rest), Anugraha (release, salvation, grace).<sup>7</sup>

The image depicts Siva in a dance that represents--symbolically, allegorically and metaphorically--the cosmic activities that affect the

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



existence, operation and destruction of everything. It is, as well, the intercession on behalf of humans into the world and is the deliverance of the world from all afflictions and an eventual leading of the world to a state of salvation and grace. Each movement of the dance, as depicted, is a part of the total dance and yet each image presents only one point in the dance that implies the total dance.

The accomplishment of the five activities comes through that one point, in the person, the beauty, the dancing actions, the music and the sacrifice of the only person capable of the accomplishment, Lord Siva. Most important, it is His dance only. Only Siva the chosen one and self-chosen one can perform the dance and when He does, the Universe, indeed all existence, for all time, responds. It is obviously a most important image with complex, sophisticated, and even mystical implications. The true meaning of the image is, however, connected to a more personal aspect of interpretation of its significance.

. . . This is His dance. Its deepest significance is felt when it is realized that it takes place within the heart and the self. Everywhere is God: that Everywhere is the heart.<sup>8</sup>

The specific interpretation that the dance has a most personal significance comes from writings of ancient origin. The following verses from the *Tirukuttu Darshana* (Visions of the Sacred Dance) forming the ninth tantra of Tirumular's *Tirumantram*, focus on the concept of the personal location of the dance.

His form is everywhere: all-pervading in His Siva-Shakti:  
Chidambaram is everywhere, everywhere His dance:  
As Shiva is all and omnipresent,  
Everywhere is Shiva's gracious dance made manifest.  
His five-fold dances are temporal and timeless.  
His five-fold dances are His Five Activities.  
By His grace He performs the five acts.  
This is the sacred dance of Uma-Sahaya.  
He dances with Water, Fire, Wind, and Ether,  
Thus our Lord Dances ever in the court.<sup>9</sup>

In such a text there is the implication that, as the images are always present, so is the dance; it is a continual endeavor of constant nature.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

. . . in . . . Tamil texts the purpose of Shiva's dance is explained. In Shivajnana Siddhiyar, Supaksha, Sotra V, 5, we find,

"For the purpose of securing both kinds of fruit to the countless souls, our Lord, with actions five, dances His dance." Both kinds of fruit, that is Iham reward in this world, and Param, bliss in Mukti."<sup>10</sup>

Again, *Unmai Vilakkam*, 32, 37, 39 informs us

The supreme Intelligence dances in the soul . . . for the purpose of removing our sins. By these means, our Father scatters the darkness of Illusion (maya), burns the thread of causality (karma), stamps down evil (mala, anava, avidya), showers Grace, and lovingly plunges the soul in the ocean of Bliss (ananda). They never see rebirths, who behold this mystic dance.<sup>11</sup>

And finally,

. . . to summarize the whole interpretation we find that The essential Significance of Shiva's dance is threefold: First, it is the image of His Rhythmic Play as the source of all movement within the Cosmos, which is Represented by the Arch: Secondly, the Purpose of His dance is to Release the Countless souls of men from the Snare of Illusion: Thirdly the Place of the Dance, Chidambaram, the Centre of the Universe, is within the Heart.<sup>12</sup>

Thus the image of Siva Nataraja has deep-seated personal, social and cultural significance. The symbolism--the allegorical and metaphoric nature of that significance--has meaning that is of the deepest, most personal character. The image and whom it depicts (Siva) and what it implies most are important. Once the history of the image is known, it is apparent that the importance of its dancer--the Lord Siva as an entity and in His several manifestations--is also more widespread in time and space than previously thought, and may have a world-wide significance.

Siva as dancer is His most important image. He has other images, however, that are also important. When He is shown seated as in the bronze from the 11th Century (Plate 9), He is considered a yogi. As yogi, or teacher, He is also called on occasion Lord of the Quarters

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.



and is presented as controlling all matter of the world, particularly animal and vegetable. A sculptural relief figure from Ellora (Plate 10) presents Siva in that manifestation. In both sculptures Siva is seated with His legs arranged in a particular manner and with other standardized iconic elements that carry the signs and symbols giving significance and meaning to the images in the manner of the Siva Nataraja.



Plate 9. Siva as yogi and physician. 9th c. C. Sivaramamurti, *Satarudriya: Vibhuti of Siva's Iconography* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976). Figure 8. Vishapaharana, Pallava, 9th century A.D., Government Museum, Madras.

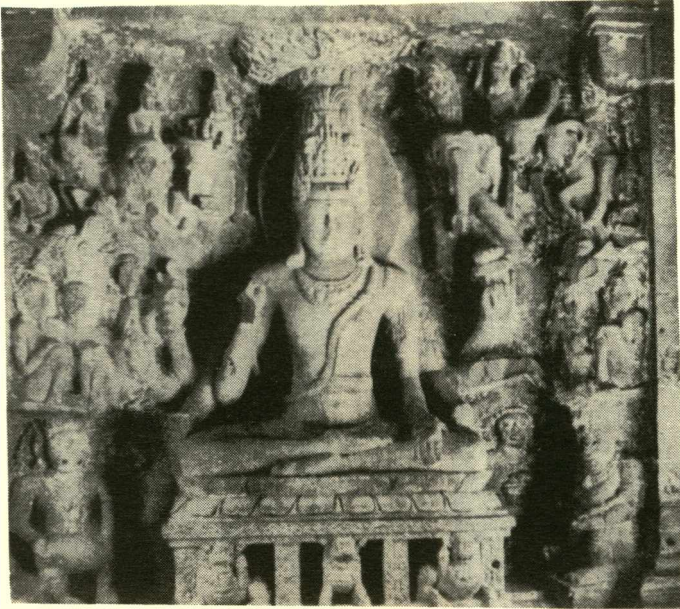


Plate 10. Siva as yogi. C. Sivaramamurti, *Satarudriya: Vibhuti of Siva's Iconography* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976). Siva as yogi, the lord of the quarters, early Western Chalukya, 7th century A.D., Ellora.

Siva is also depicted in an image of the great lingam. It is felt this is another important manifestation. He appeared in that configuration early in the history of India. The human figure accompanying the carved stone lingam from the Shunga period (Plate 11) is thought to be Siva. In the Elephanta cave shrine to Siva, the centerpiece to the central shrine is also a lingam (Plate 12). In the myth-history of the genesis of Siva, He appears from a column of flame that is also lingam in form and that is often presented as an image (Plate 13). As lingam, Siva becomes the vital male member of a cosmic male/female duality. It is a most complex and sophisticated arrangement incorporating His consort Paravati and interlocking their duality to such a degree of gender convergence as to amount to androgyny.



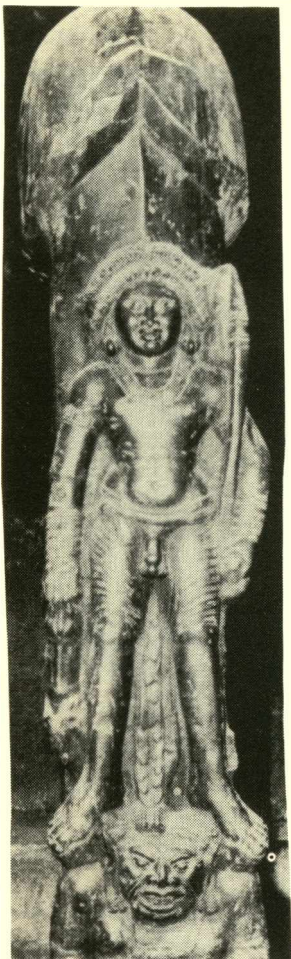


Plate 11. Siva as Linga, Sata-vahana, as Ushnishi. 2nd century B.C. C. Sivaramamurti, *Satarudiyā: Vibhūti of Siva's Iconography* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976). Figure 9. Siva against *linga*, Satavahana, 2nd century B.C., Gudimallam, Andhra Pradesh.

Plate 12. Linga on pedestal in shrine, Elephanta. 550 C.E. Carmel Berkson, *Elephanta: The Cave of Shiva* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), Plate 7.

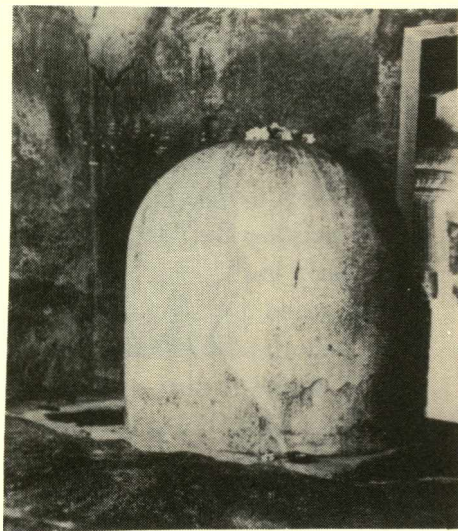




Plate 13. Lingodbhava, Siva in flaming column. 11th c. C. Sivarmamurti, *Satarudriya: Vibhuti of Siva's Iconography* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976). Figure 19. Lingodbhava, Chola, 11th century A.D., Brihadisvara temple, Tanjavur.

Siva is also often associated with the Nandi bull in several image configurations (Plate 14). Nandi becomes Siva's closest animal-association and the bull is an obviously important attribute of Siva as principal Hindu God. All of these several manifestations have numbers of images. It is through these images that it is possible to speculate about the very ancient beginnings of the Siva image itself and its importance as a factor in culture and civilization.





Plate 14. Siva dancing with Paravati and Nandi. 8th century. C. Sivaramamurti, *Nataraja in Art, Thought and Literature*. (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974). Figure 24, Chapter Thirteen, Siva in *chatura* dancing on Apasmara, with bull behind, from ceiling, Papanatha temple, Pattadakal, Early Western Chalukya, 8th century A.D.

Siva's role and depiction as dancer, particularly as Nataraja, form the most important aspect of His imagery and existence within the pantheon of Hindu Gods. It is probable that role is also part of the original base for the image in ancient times. The source for that role and image comes from earliest times in the history of India. Two specific early objects reflect the character of the Nataraja image. A small figure found at Mohenjo-daro from approximately 2500 BCE (Plate 15) has several attributes which parallel those of the much later Siva image. The general shape of the figure's body, the smooth finish and sensitive delineation of its anatomy so as to reveal the sensuous character of the human figure are all similar to what is found in later

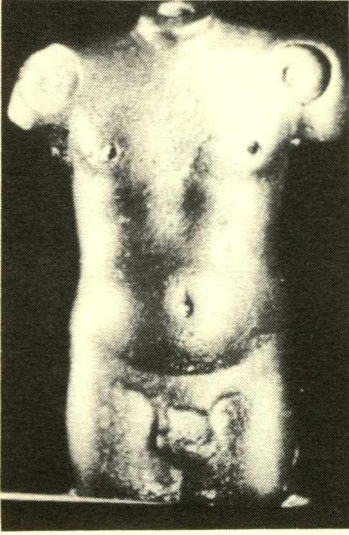


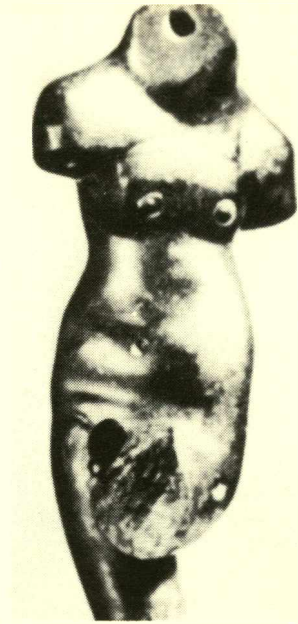
Plate 15. Stone Torso  
from Mohenjo-daro.  
1500 B.C.E. Slide col-  
lection, Western Wash-  
ington University.

Siva figures. Most intriguing is the set of arm sockets on the front facing of the shoulders. These sockets are a standard technique used by sculptors throughout time for attaching arms that thrust away from the plane of the figure and from the stone used. Thus the figure has one set of arm stubs that hang down from the shoulders and the sockets imply that another set of arms would have pointed in front of the figure. This is exactly the configuration of later Siva Nataraja figures. The figure is also ithyphallic in structure, though the male member has been broken away. It might also be conjectured that the profile of the Mohenjo-daro figure indicates a dancing pose.

There is another figure from that same early period with even closer parallels to the later Siva image, one more obviously in a dancing mode. The small figure from Harappa (Plate 16) has much of the same sensual character as the figure from Mohenjo-daro, but the legs are more complete and one thrusts forward as though in the raised foot attitude much like Siva.



Plate 16. Stone torso  
from Harappa. 1500  
B.C.E. Slide collection,  
Western Washington  
University.



Both of these objects come from the historical period of India, during which the Rig Veda, at least in verbal form, appeared. Both are often associated with that tradition and most often with the person of Rudra, the being from those tales often thought of as the precursor of Siva. The Rig Veda, and possibly the images, came from the time of the invasions of the Aryans into India. The Aryans were a group of people that migrated from their original home area in Central Asia into India and other areas of the world during the period of the Indus Valley cultures, 4000 to 1500 BCE, and the time of the appearance of these two figures in the archaeological strata of Mohenjo-daro and Harappa. Whether the Aryan were responsible for the Rig Veda or the figures has yet to be determined. However, both are associated in time and placement and it is a strong possibility that the migrating Aryans were responsible for both. Evidences of the Aryans also appeared in other locations in Europe, Asia Minor and, possibly, China.

There are other depictions on objects from the early period of the history of India that also resemble the later Siva image. A most significant depiction is that on a seal from the Indus Valley culture showing a figure seated in what appears to be a yogi pose (Plate 17).



Plate 17. Steatite Seal, Ithyphalic figure seated as yogi, Mohenjodaro. 2500 B.C.E. C. Sivaramamurti, *Satarudriya: Vibhuti of Siva's Iconography* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1976). Figure 13. Pasupati seal, Proto-historic, 2500 B.C.E., Mohenjodaro, National Museum collection, New Delhi.

The figure has three faces, is seated with feet drawn into the pubic area, which displays ithyphallic indications and has a horned helmet on its head. Arranged around the figure are several animals that appear on other seals of the time. The three-faced aspect is similar to the Sadasiva character given Siva in the great panel of the Elephanta Cave (Plate 18) of the eighth or ninth century. The yogi pose of the figure on the seal is obviously similar to that of Plates 9 and 10 wherein Siva is presented as Lord of the Quarters. The animals dispersed around the seated figure on the seal parallels Siva in His function as Lord of the Quarters. The ithyphallic character of the seal's figure is a parallel to Siva's characterization as the lingam (Plates 12 and 13).



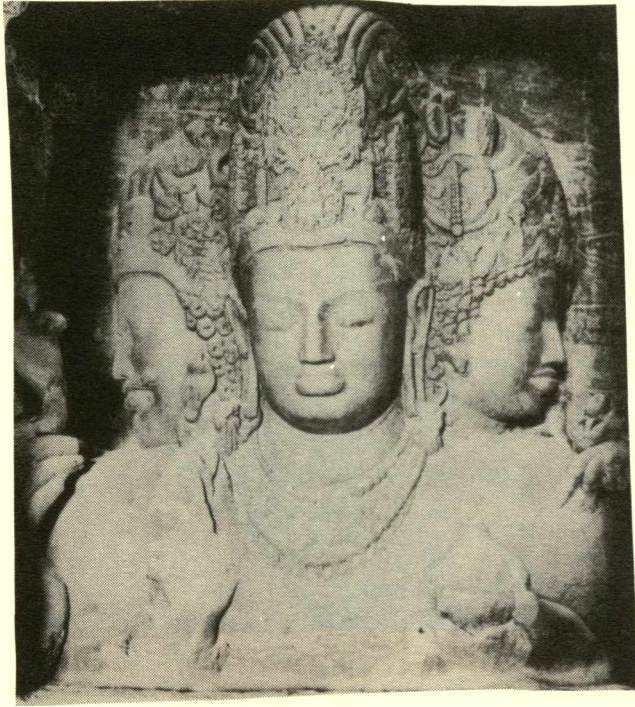


Plate 18. Sadasiva, Elephanta. 550 C.E. Carmel Berkson, *Elephanta: The Cave of Shiva* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Plate 40. Sadashiva-Eternal Shiva, south wall, central panel.

The bull figure on the seal and the horned helmet on the human figure present another parallel association with Siva. That is the association with the Nandi Bull (Plate 14). Several other objects from early times make the same association. One is a small rock plaque from the Indus Valley (Plate 19) depicting the helmeted figure on one side and the bull on the other.



Plate 19. View of two sides of stone plaque. Mohenjo-daro. 2000 B.C.E. Slide collection, Western Washington University.

The Siva figure has its precedents and prototypes from the very early history of India. It is a strong probability that the image of Siva, its significance, meaning, and emotional content for India derived from the ancient beginnings indicated here. Since those early beginnings from the Indus Valley cultures were well developed, it would also appear that they had a longer gestation before their appearance in the period 2500 to 1500 BCE. Thus, Siva (as the Great Dancer and all that implies) must come from the very earliest ages of human culture--possibly from as early as the beginnings of human life during the Paleolithic period. From somewhere and sometime in the far distant past, there came this Great Dancer who controls the Universe and all that is in it as well as the destiny of humankind.

The impact of the Siva image, and its possible early origins, has important historical implications and acquires new significance when some other factors are considered. There are some remarkable similarities between that image and its early origins and several other objects from other places in the world.



Several early objects from European locations have similarities to the yogi aspects of Siva. The objects are identified as belonging to various cultures. One from the interior of the sanctuary found near Entremong in France has been identified as "Celto-Ligurian" at times and as "Roman" at others (Plate 20). Another similar object identified as "Celtic" is from a similar sanctuary at Bouray, France (Plate 21). Similar objects exist from other sites in France and Germany, indicating a rather widespread manifestation of objects similar to at least one aspect of the Hindu Siva.



Plate 20. Entrance, shrine at Velaux, France. Borley Museum Marseille, France. 200 B.C.E. Slide collection, Western Washington University.

Plate 21. God of Bouray, France. 200 B.C.E.? Slide collection, Western Washington University.



A well-known object from Denmark from the same general time as the two sanctuary figures has some aspects similar to the foregoing images. The Gunderstrup Bowl (Plate 22) has a series of scenes in repose on the plates that form the outer shell of the bowl. One scene (Plate 23) shows the image of what has been identified as Cerunus, the northern, possibly Celtic, god of Earth and Animals. Not only is the image seated in the yogi pose, it is placed in a setting not unlike that of Siva as God of Quarters and that of the scene on the seal from Mohenjo-daro (Plate 17). The visual and chronological similarities between the bowl and the seal images, including the horned helmet, are remarkable. The horned image appears elsewhere on the Gunderstrup Bowl as another male god. The bottom plate of the bowl has the image of a recumbent bull. That aspect provides the basis for speculation that the bowl was used in some manner involving the sacrifice of a bull and recalls other seal images from early India in which a bull is being bled into a bowl-like object (Plate 24).





Plate 22.  
Gunderstrup  
Cauldron.  
Denmark.  
200-100  
B.C.E. Slide  
collection,  
Western  
Washington  
University.



Plate 23. Side panel, interior, Gundestrup Cauldron, figure of Cerunus god of earth and animals. Slide collection, Western Washington University.



Plate 24. Steatite seal, Bull at sacrificial cauldron, Indus Valley 2000, B.C.E. Slide collection, Western Washington University.

Another class of objects from Central Europe has other similarities to the early versions of what eventually became the image of Siva. These are the upright stone pillar figures generally also identified with the early history of the area. There are a number of these objects from France, Germany and other countries. The sandstone pillar from Holzgerlingen, Germany--with its lingam-like shape, two faces, and horned character--is similar to the early Mohenjo-daro seal images and recalls Siva's connections to the lingam form in his origins and religious connections (Plate 25).



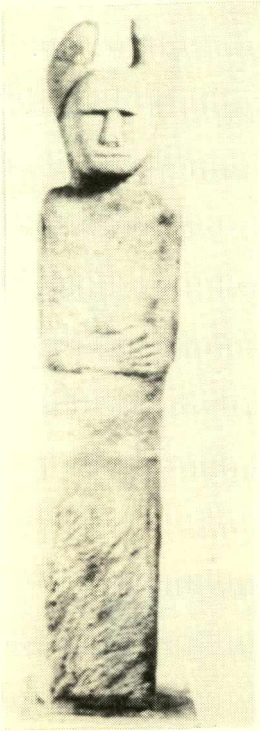


Plate 25. Janiform stele, Cerunus?, Germany. 1000 B.C.E.? Slide collection, Western Washington University.

The early Mohenjo-daro images that acted as the basis for Siva came into the Indus Valley with a migration of peoples from elsewhere. The Celtic peoples also migrated into Europe from elsewhere, and the people of both migrations had, apparently, the same general language base. Both migrations took place at essentially the same periods of time. Both groups had, it would appear, a similar image with a major function at the center of its social/cultural existence.

### Conclusions

Siva is a major god of the Hindu Pantheon. The image of Siva is the manifestation of the male principle of the world and signifies the ultimate creative and destructive aspect of the universe. Siva also establishes the rhythm of the universe and is the means of salvation, release, and bliss for all creatures of the Universe, particularly human

beings. The image of Siva is the most important symbol and sign for allegorical and metaphorical understanding of the forces of the universe; both actual and metaphysical. The most important (and most often presented) manifestation of that image is Siva as Nataraja--Siva as the Lord of the Dance. Spiritually, that image depicts the controlling forces of the cosmos and the savior of all existence in the act of control and saving.

Aesthetically, the image of Siva Nataraja presents the form acceptable at the highest level of a long, traditional axiological system in India. It would also appear that image and its attached aesthetic axiology system may also have been spread, in modified form to other areas of the world where they enjoyed an equal (if not quite so long) manifestation. It is distinctly possible that the spiritual connotations of the image--its symbolism, sign quality, its allegorical and metaphorical meaning--may have (also in modified form) accompanied the spread.

Historically the form of Siva's image as Nataraja and, in all probability its meaning, derived from the primordial times of human existence. The appearance of the form in the Indus Valley early in India's history as the result of intrusive cultures indicates its origins elsewhere. The manner of that appearance (that is, as a fully-developed image complete with obvious iconographical character) implies a most ancient origin: in all probability, during early Paleolithic times in an as yet to be determined place. The hints of a mountain origin in the early myth/history of India may be a clue to the location of that place. The connections of the form with an intrusive, thus migrating, group of people provides another possibility. The migration responsible for the early form of the Siva image in India also had its parallel in groups of migrating related peoples who went into Central Europe. Images similar to that of India's Siva exist in those areas. Thus, the primordial concept and image of a beautiful, male-oriented, hero/savior, figure/person/dancer in ritual garb, establishing the cadence of the cosmos and providing the salvation of the Universe, particularly for humans, may have been carried from a central source in several different directions where several different permutations from the original primordial form took place. Somewhere in the far distant past of human existence ancestral to these manifestations there was a hero/dancer and a ritual performed that provided the factual base for Siva's dance as Nataraja and possibly for images central to other cultural groups. Future research will be undertaken to explore the origin and spread of the image.



It is also obvious that the manifestation of Siva as Nataraja during the history of India is the most, and possibly the last, pure form of that image. Thus the image, its iconography, its mytho/historical texts and its rituals may provide important insight into the origins, manifestation, significance and meaning of the primordial form from which it came. From the Siva phenomenon, it is possible to gain profound insights into the dawn of human beginnings and the psychological origins of those beginnings as they were carried elsewhere, as well as the aesthetic base they provided.

Nataraja is only one manifestation, though the most important, of Siva. When the others are considered, then further speculations about origins, significance, meaning, and world-spread and effect can be made. As an instance, Siva also appears with his consort Paravat. The mytho-historical aspects of that union and its result are vast and intriguing. The wild mountain dancer quasi-hippy boy and the seductive, equally wild daughter of the mountain king make a union of enormous significance. That union became the ultimate manifestation of male/female identity interchange, man/wife perfect couple, sensual/sexual connection, and final destruction/devouring death. Thus, the Siva image can be expanded to enormous dimensions. That expansion, however, is another tale for another time.

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