

NATARAJA

(The Dancing Siva)

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1. Siva Worship

1.1. Lord Siva of Hindu religion is usually represented and worshipped in His unborn, invisible form, *Sthanu* or *Linga* form. He is the Supreme Being. He is personified as eternal fire, *jyothi*. The Supreme Being cannot be described in any other fashion. The Linga format therefore evolved to represent a pillar of that brilliant fire within which resides Lord Siva. The root and the roof of that pillar cannot be traced even by Gods like Brahma and Vishnu. As per ancient Hindu scriptures, Linga is **not** a phallic symbol. The *Tantrik* form of worship of Siva in ferocious forms like *Bhairva*, *Virbhadra*, *Kapalika* etc., and of His consort, the *Devi*, in forms like *Kali* and *Durga* evolved and became popular in later years. This tantrik school of worship, according to some researchers, was responsible for interpreting the Linga as a phallic symbol. Over a period of time, the tantrik concept (misconcept?) has been wrongly quoted as the belief of Hindus. The tenets and philosophy of Hinduism, as our early preceptors practiced and preached, lie scattered in various scriptures in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, and in scripts like Devanagari, Grantham etc., some of which are not even in common use these days. When foreigners, who were not very familiar with Hinduism and its tenets in its ancient traditional pure form, became interested in consolidating Hindu religious ideas and started writing books, they found it convenient to explain the Linga as a phallic symbol! Their books became a convenient store-house even for the Hindus to learn more about their own religion. Gradually, the Hindus themselves started believing that the Linga is a phallic symbol! Slowly and legends and rituals started growing around that belief and today, we have numerous stothras, slokas, poems and stories built around that *misinterpretation* of the Linga!

1.2 Siva is also represented in His anthropomorphic aspects, *i.e.*, in various human forms like Chandra-sekhara, Somaskandha, Ardha-nareeswara, Dakshina-murthy, Bikshatana etc., and the popular Nataraja. Most of us are aware that the Nataraja bronze icons have been appreciated as a piece of art all over the world, and that the Nataraja statue can be identified as the presiding deity on stages where classical Indian dance artists perform. Is that all?

1.3 Nataraja represents the dancing Siva; the Lord who is performing the dance of creation of the Universe, the cosmic dance; and that too in the graceful and joyful way, by performing the *ananda tandava*. The name Nataraja itself means Lord of Dancers, or King of Actors. A lot of thoughts, care and perhaps centuries of evolution and perfection should have gone behind the emergence of the presently familiar Nataraja posture, which has not undergone any basic changes over at least the past ten centuries. What does this figure signify?

2. Nataraja Legend

According to legends (*puranas*, especially, *Koyil-puranam*), the heretical *rishis* (sages) leading ritualistic lives in the sacred forest, *tarukavana*, became proud of their rituals, forgetting the Lord who is Supreme. In order to correct the erring sages, when Lord Siva assumed the form of a scantily clad beautiful human being, called Bikshatana, and wandered begging arms amidst the hermitages, the performance of rituals by the rishis got distributed since their womenfolk could not control their desire and started following the Lord. Annoyed, and without realizing who the Bikshatana was, the rishis endeavored to destroy Him by means of incantations. They created a fierce tiger from the sacrificial fires and rushed it upon Him. He seized it, tore it apart with his finger nails, stripped off its skin and wrapped it about Himself as a silken cloth! Not discouraged by this failure, the rishis renewed their offerings to the sacrificial fires, created poisonous cobras from that fire. The cobras docilely became things-of-beauty, coiling around His neck and limbs. Then, the Lord began to dance! But then, the rishis created a malignant monster called *muyalakha* and sent it after the Lord. The name *muyalakha* itself means “a person who can cause the illness called *muyalakham*”. *Muyalakham* is also referred to by Saint Arunagirinathar in one of his *thiruppugazh* songs. It is a disease like “fits”, which can afflict people suddenly and incapacitate them. Lord Siva conquered *muyalakha*, placed him under His right foot, pressed the tip of His toe, and broke the creature’s back, so that it writhed upon the ground. Siva resumed His dance, witnessed by gods and rishis. Desperately, the rishis ordered their real power and tool for *yagnas* (rituals), namely the sacrificial fire (*agni*) itself, to destroy the Intruder. The Lord just took it easily on His left hand! Finally, the rishis chanted the *veda mantras* and fired the four *vedas* themselves as ammunition at the Lord. The *vedas* prostrated at the feet of the Lord and got themselves converted into anklets to adorn Him. The Lord laughed! With the monster under His feet as a dwarf, He took His *viswarupa* form – a figure that is so big that it covers the entire universe. He started dancing. All the worlds and all the lives and materials on them started reverberating to His rhythmic movements and began shivering. Only then, the rishis realized that they are fighting the Supreme Lord Himself! Repenting for their mistake, *sin*, the rishis prostrated before Him and begged for forgiveness. The benevolent Lord not only forgave them and bestowed them with wisdom (*gnana*), but also assumed His benign form with four arms and performed *ananda-tandava* to make them happy! Thus, Siva came to be venerated as *ananda-tandava-moorthy*, the Nataraja. When *adiseshha*, the sacred multi-hooded cobra who serves Lord Vishnu as His bed, prayed to Lord Siva, above all things, for the boon of beholding once more this mystic dance, the Lord promised that he should behold the dance again along with sage *Vyaghrapada* in sacred *Thillai*, the present day Chidambaram, which is considered as the centre of universe.

3. The Figure

3.1 This dance of Siva in Thillai forms the motif of the South Indian images of Shri Nataraja. These images vary amongst themselves in minor details. Such variations arise out of the various conceptions or legends built around Siva in general, and not due to the dance in particular. All the images express one fundamental conception, one philosophy,

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namely, His Dance is *Nadanta Dance*; the ultimate achievement of the rhythm generated by the Dance is the cause of the very existence of the universe; it is the Dance of Cosmic Activity. Every other conception or philosophy is derived out of this. Before proceeding to the next section which enquires what these conceptions or philosophies may be, it will be necessary to describe the image of Nataraja as typically represented and its concrete symbolism.

3.2 Lord Siva, as Nataraja, is represented as dancing within a circular halo of fire, emerging from the mouths of a pair of sea animals. It is called *thiruvasi*, the encircling glory. It is symbolic of the mystic word (ॐ) *Ohm* (or *Aum*, as it is sometimes spelled). *Ohm* is the origin of all sounds, words, music and the *vedas*. The halo of fire is created by the whirl of His dance movements. It signifies the vital processes of the Universe. It also signifies the fire which at the end of the *Yuga-Pralaya-Kalpa* (*Yuga-Pralaya-Kalpa* means aeon, the age of the universe), destroys everything and everybody, when the Lord performs the dance of destruction. Only the *pancha-brahmas* (the five deities-Brahma, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheswara or Iswara or Isana, and Sadasiva; a set of five Lords created by Siva out of His own self), His consort, the *Lalithaparameswari* and His mount, the *Nandikeswara*, are spared.

3.3 His hair whirls as He dances. The crown just manages to sit on His head. At the base of the crown is a human skull, symbolizing Siva's power of destruction.

3.4 The locks of hair falling below the crown support a maiden, a cobra and the crescent moon. The maiden is the holy river Ganga, symbol of fertility and God's grace. According to scriptures, Ganga came down from heavens in all her splendor, vigor and force when sage *Bhagiratha* prayed to her to bestow *moksha* upon his ancestors by flowing over the place where they were cremated. She could have deluged the earth. The Lord intercepted her. She got lost in His matted hairs. She was allowed to come down gently through a few of His hairs!

3.5 The cobra is the symbol of power as well as the cosmic force.

3.6 The moon is the symbol of time. It came up from the Ocean of Milk when it was churned for ambrosia. It was worn by Siva. Ambrosia is the drink of immortality. *Bikshatanamurthy* is worshipped as the Lord of all Physicians. In that form, moon is used as the cup by Him to hold ambrosia. Grace, fertility and immortality are therefore symbolized in the wearing of moon by Siva in His form as Nataraja.

3.7 Lord Siva has three eyes; the third one on the forehead in between the eyebrows is called the *eye of wisdom*. The three eyes also symbolize the three spans of time – the past, the present and the future. They also represent the three energy-givers to mankind – the Sun, the Moon and the Fire.

3.8 Lord Siva, as Nataraja, represents both a man and a woman; He wears a man's ear-ring (குண்டலம்) on His right and a woman's (தூடங்கம்) on His left!

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3.9 Brahma is the creator of living beings in the universe, as ordained by Siva. Vishnu is the protector. Rudra is the destroyer of the universe at the end of every 200 years of Brahma's life-span. According to *Siva-maha-puranam*, the age of this universe is 200 million *chathur-yugams*, which is 864 trillion human or terrestrial years. Yuga-Pralayam occurs at the end of this period, and Rudra destroys the universe. A Brahma-kalpa occurs at the end of the life-time of one Brahma. Brahma's life-time spans 360×10^6 Yuga-Pralaya Intervals, that is, $3,11,040 \times 10^{18}$ (i.e., 0.3 trillion trillion) human years! Siva adds the skull of the Brahma to a necklace of skulls that He wears, after the universe is destroyed along with the Brahma, by Rudra, at the end of a *Brahma-kalpa*. The skulls laugh at those who consider themselves as immortal and indulge in worldly pleasures. They are a reminder to all those who are born, that they must die one day. The length and the contents of the necklace of skulls should testify to the eternity of Siva. In one day of Lord Siva, according to *Siva-maha-puranam*, 100 billion trillion (100×10^{18}) Brahma-kalpas occur! In the evening of every day in Siva's life (*pradhyushad-kaalam*) – *pradosha-kalam* – of Siva), *maha-pralayam* occurs and continues during His night. Everything and everybody, including pancha-brahmas, but excluding *Lalitha-Parameswari* and *Nandikeswara*, perish. The re-creation of universe along with pancha-brahmas starts from His dawn – early morning (*ushadh-kaalam*)!

3.10 Whenever the universe is destroyed, the ashes go to adorn His body. It becomes the sacred *vibhuti*, venerated by His devotees as a sacrament symbolizing the process of purification by the fire of His grace. As His dance proceeds, the ashes get scattered all around, forming a pattern. The lines of the pattern are the lines of a plan for the re-creation of the universe. He also wears the *tripundra* mark on his forehead, made with *vibhuti* smeared with three fingers. The three lines symbolize *trisetatya*, the three forms of truth – in thought, word and deed. They also signify that the three worlds can be conquered by penance and austerity only.

3.11 He also wears a necklace of *rudrakshas*, the beads made out of the seeds from a holy tree (*Eleaocarpus ganitrus*), symbolizing piety.

3.12 There are ninety-six constituents (*tatvas*) of the universe; they become the ninety-six strands (*shannavathi*) that go in to make the three threads of the sacred-thread (*upaveetam*) worn by Him over the left shoulder, across the chest and under the right arm. The three sacred threads on Him symbolize the glory of the three yugas (*Kritha*, *Thretha* and *Dwapara yugas* – *Kaliyuga* is not included!).

3.13 Lord Siva is the supreme *yogi*. According to the yoga discipline, the cosmic force is called *kundalini* and is symbolically represented as cobra. There is no wonder therefore that cobra's coil around various parts of His body.

3.14 Nataraja is represented with four arms. The drum (*damarukam* - உடுக்கை) on the right upper hand denotes rhythm and grace. The right lower hand is in *abhaya hastha*, a gesture that dispels fear and assures protection and preservation. The fire is His left upper hand symbolizes destruction. The gracefully hanging left lower hand symbolizes beauty and mercy. It points the devotee towards His uplifted left foot. (குஞ்சித பாதம், குஞ்சித =

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தூக்கி வளைத்த). This foot signifies release from bondage which is the salvation of the devotee. It can thus be seen that a fine representation of His omnipotence is incorporated in His four arms themselves.

3.15 He wears a loin cloth from the skin of a ferocious tiger, symbolizing power. Like a tiger, one's pride (அஹங்காரம்) surges forward from within. It should be controlled and conquered. The Lord has shown the way by conquering it and wearing it symbolically as a tiger-skin.

3.16 The ancient scriptures which form the tenets of Hinduism, namely the vedas become His anklets (சிலம்புகள்). And, below His knees, can also be seen bells that are worn by heroes of the battle-field, again a symbol of power. The bells and His anklets also proclaim that nada, vibratory music, originated when the Lord danced.

3.17 His right foot rests on the demon, *muyalakha*. The demon is holding a snake (not a cobra) in his hand, symbolizing that he is an evil-doer. Demons are of mighty proportions when compared to human beings. This demon looks like a dwarf under the foot of the Lord, who has conquered him. The Lord's presence dwarfs everything!

3.18 The Lord's left foot is gracefully raised. It is symbolic of salvation. It is a well-balanced act. The devotees who seek His feet are required to be well balanced in their attitudes to worldly living, to attain salvation. The Lord is ever ready to look for such balanced devotees and bestow salvation upon them.

3.19 The whole figure of Nataraja including the flaming halo stands on a lotus, symbolizing the *kundalini shakti*, which in turn reminds us that from within oneself, one can identify the Lord and get blessed.

3.20 Now, we are ready to explore the philosophy or conception around Siva's representation as Nataraja.

4. The Philosophy

4.1 Even though the legend around Nataraja covers many of the iconographical aspects of the statue, according to Sri Ananda Coomaraswamy, "the legend has, after all, no very close connection with the real meaning of the dance". The real *meaning* of the dance is the *philosophy* as understood and interpreted by *shaivites*. Some portions of that philosophy have already been exposed to the reader in the preceding section while describing the figure of Nataraja, including those parts of the figure which are not directly related to the *Koil Puranam* legend. We will now see them in greater depth.

4.2 The Lord is *the* Dancer, who, like the heat latent in firewood, diffuses His power in mind and matter, and makes them dances in their turn. This cosmic activity is the central motif of the dance. The dance of Siva, in fact represents His five activities (*Panchakrithya*), viz., *Srishti* (overlooking, creation, evolution), *Sthithi* (preservation, support), *Samharam* (destruction, involution), *Tirobhavam* (veiling, embodiment, illusion,

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and also giving rest), and Anugraham (release, salvation, grace). These, separately considered, are the activities of the five deities – Brahmna, Vishnu, Rudra, Maheswara and Sadasiva, the pancha-brahmas.

4.3 According to *Unmai Vilakkam*, *Chidambara Mummani Kovai*, and *Thiru Koothu Darisanam* in *Thirumoolar's Thirumanthiram*, all Tamil scriptures, creation (srishti) arises from the rhythmic sounds of the damarukam in His right upper hand; protection (*sthithi*) proceeds from His right lower hand which is showing the *abhaya-hastham*; from the fire in His left upper hand, proceeds destruction (Samharam), His right foot, firmly planted on the ground, gives an abode to the tired soul struggling in the toils of causality (tirobhavam); His left foot, lifted and aloft, and His left lower hand pointing towards that foot, give release (salvation, anugraham).

4.4 The Lord's dance arouses dormant energies. These energies, when gathered and projected into the ever-moving forces, form the energies of creation, preservation of forms created, and the ultimate destruction of the universe. This is followed again by evolution, maintenance and destruction. This productive energy of the Absolute in its pristine strength represents the forces of evolution and involution, the appearance and disappearance of the universe. Siva, as Nataraja, is the One who keeps the world rhythm going. His dance is the most inspiring and pragmatic act of typifying the eternal rhythm, which is the cause of the infinite creative process. He is the presiding deity of the mind. The entire universe created by Siva is His *shakti* or energy. It is like an ocean which fills all space and Lord Siva dances in the centre of this energy. His dance-movements represent the movement of His *shakti*.

4.5 How many various dances of Siva are known to His worshippers? It is difficult to say.

4.6 There is a Sanskrit book named *Sri Chidambara kshetra Sarvasvam*, which contains sage *Patanjali's* dictates, precisely describing all the rituals that are to be performed at *Thillai Sabhanayakar sannidhi* (the abode of Nataraja). In that book can be found an *ashtothara satha namavali*. According to the same, based on what is done by Lord, when it was done, for whom it was done and where it was done, 108 names relating to His dance alone have been coined and are used for worshipping the dancing Siva at Chidambaram. That means there are at least 108 dances of Siva.

4.7 There is a reference to 38 dances of Siva also. Agamas are ancient scriptures which describe the temple architecture, sculpture, iconography, rituals to be performed in temples etc. Dr. R. Nagaswamy quotes from one such agama, viz., *Makuta Agamam*, as follows: "That part of that agama which is available to us, also describes the dancing incarnation of Siva. It says that the Lord performing *ananda-tandavam* should be installed in the centre of one's thoughts and mind, and worshipped as an incarnation of art and nada. He should be conceived as Nataraja with one face, two legs, and four arms in the centre of a circle. He should be praised as an incarnation of thirty-eight art-forms, of thirty-eight manthras and of *thirty-eight dance-forms*". In *sundarakoothu*, the ninth chapter of

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Thirumanthiram, Saint Thirumoolar also mentions “eight plus five times six dances (எட்டோடு ஐந்தாறு நடம்)”. This leads us to take that there are at least 38 dances of Siva.

4.8 Whatever be the number of dances known to His worshippers, the root idea behind all of these dances is more or less one and the same, *the manifestation of primal* (fundamental) *rhythmic energy*. The primeval (of first age of the universe) dancing clearly ordains and orchestrates the choral dance of the constellations, the planets and the stars, their interweaving and interchange in orderly harmony. Here, it is only apt to quote from the scholarly writings of Ananda Coomaraswamy: Whatever the origins of Siva’s dance, it became in time the clearest image of the activity of God, which any art or religion can boast of. Of the various dances, three only are treated as well-known dances and discussed by the scholar. And of the three, the one that Nataraja performs becomes the main subject of interpretation in all scriptures on His dance.

4.9 The first one is the *Pradosha Dance* in the Himalayas, during the *ksheera sagara mathanam* (churning of the Ocean of Milk for ambrosia, jointly by celestials and demons). After taking the *haalaha* (the deadly poison that came out of the ocean) and saving the universe from destruction, the Lord dances to reassure Parvati and all other Gods that He is well. In the pictures of this dance, Siva is two-handed. There is no demon getting crushed under His foot. No special interpretations of this dance appear to occur in Saiva literature according to Ananda Coomaraswamy.

4.10 The second well known dance is the *yuga pralaya tandava nrutham* or *bhasmodhdhoolitha tandavam*, which He performs in cremation grounds emphasizing His *tamasic* aspect as Bhairava and Virabhadra. Here Siva dances in His eight-armed (some scriptures say ten-armed) form. He dances wildly, mostly with His Devi, accompanied by troop of capering imps (small mischievous devils or spirits running or jumping about playfully). Representations of this dance are common amongst ancient sculptures found at Ellora, Elephanta and Bhubaneswar.

4.11 Thirdly, we have the *Nadanta Dance* of Nataraja, before the assembly (sabha) of saints, rishis and all those who were gifted, in the golden hall (*ponnambalam – kanaga mantapam*) of Chidambaram or Thillai, which is the centre of the universe. This form of dance was first revealed to the rishis at Tarukavanam, and subsequently repeated at Thillai for the sake of sages Patanjali and Vyagrapada. He came to be known as *Sabha-Nayaka* and as *Kanaga-Sabhapathy*. It is Kanaga-Sabhapathy who is presiding over all the stages where bharathanatyam artists perform, since He is the King of Dances, the Nataraja.

4.12 Siva is the destroyer and loves the burning ground. But what does He destroy as Nataraja? Not merely the heavens and earth at the close of a world cycle, but the fetters that bind each separate soul. The crematorium is the heart of His worshipper, where ego is destroyed, illusions and deeds are burnt away. In this simile, we recognize the historical connection between Siva’s gracious dance as Nataraja, and His wild dance as *Sudalai-aadi*. *Unmai Vilakkam* says “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

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the thread of causality (*karma*) stamps down evil (*mala, anava, avidya*), showers Grace, and lovingly plunges the soul into the ocean of bliss (*ananda*)”.

4.13 To summarize the whole interpretation of dancing Siva as Nataraja, we find that the essential significance of Siva’s dance is three-fold: (i) It is the image of His rhythmic play as the source of all movements within the cosmos, which is represented by the Arch (*thiruvasi*) (ii) The purpose of His dance is to release the countless souls of men from the Snare of Illusion (iii) The place of the dance, Chidambaram, the centre of the universe, is within one’s heart.

4.14 Nature is inert; it cannot pulsate, dance, till Siva wills it; He rises from His rapture; His dance creates *nada* and sends pulsating waves of awakening, into inert matter; The matter starts dancing, appearing as a glory round about Him; Dancing, He sustains its manifold phenomena; In the fullness of time, still dancing, He destroys all forms and names by fire and gives new rest. This sounds like poetry; none-the-less it is science!

4.15 The conceptualization of Lord Siva in the form of Nataraja can thus be seen to assimilate the essence of various disciplines – Religion, Yoga, Mysticism, Philosophy, Art, Sculpture, Iconography and above all, even the modern science, which goes on unraveling the mysteries of nature to us slowly every day!

