

THE DANCE OF ŚIVA

Religion, art and poetry in South India

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FIGURE

1. Plan of Sabhānāyaka temple, Cidambaram. Principal features.

Introduction

NAṬARĀJA, THE KING OF DANCERS

Dancing Śiva is the form of the Hindu god Śiva best known in the West, and indeed seems to be the most popular visual representation of Hinduism for the modern world. Although there is a wide variety of Dancing Śivas, dating back to at least the fifth century AD, what has become so familiar to us is one particular form, known as Naṭarāja, 'King of Dancers'. This image achieved canonical form in Cōla bronzes of the tenth century AD and then continued to be reproduced in metal, stone, and other substances up to the present. The Cōla Naṭarāja is often said to be the supreme statement of Hindu art.

Naṭarāja dances, his right foot supported by a crouching figure, his left foot elegantly raised. Of his four arms, one swings downwards, pointing to the raised foot; another with palm held up signals, 'Do not fear!' In his other hands he holds aloft a drum and a flame. The river Gaṅgā sits in his hair. A cobra uncoils from his lower right forearm, and the crescent moon and a skull are on his crest. He dances within an arch of flames. This dance is called the Dance of Bliss (*ānandatāṇḍava*).¹

This dance is said to have been first performed in Cidambaram, 244 km south of Madras, on the east coast of India. Historically, Cidambaram has been a centre for the worship of Dancing Śiva since the seventh century, and for the worship of the Dance of Bliss since its origination 300 years later. For worshippers of Śiva (*Śaivas*) the Dance of Bliss is eternal, having neither beginning nor end; and for many of them the Cidambaram temple is the most important of all Śiva temples. For Southern Śaivas, it is simply *kōyil* – the temple. All other Śiva temples have a Naṭarāja shrine, or at least a Naṭarāja image, beside the main *linga* shrine.

The theology of Naṭarāja is as follows. Naṭarāja is Lord of the Universe. His dance expresses the state of bliss which he enjoys and

embodies. He dwells in the heart of every person, and though he is to be found throughout the universe his complete form is uniquely present in Cidambaram. Cidambaram is the heart of the world. Naṭarāja is always accompanied by his consort, whose name in Cidambaram is Śivakāmasundarī. She herself is his knowledge, his desire, his action. She embodies the compassion he feels for the world. Naṭarāja's left foot is raised in dance so that worshippers may bow down before it. He grants all wishes. The sight of Naṭarāja in Cidambaram is a great blessing, and worship of him frees one from rebirth.

Naṭarāja, Śiva as the king of dancers, did not become known in the West until the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1912 this form of Śiva received detailed treatment in an eloquent essay by A. K. Coomaraswamy entitled 'The Dance of Śiva'. The essay has been constantly cited, often in its entirety, in treatments of the Dance of Śiva. Its conclusion is quoted most frequently:

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! . . . No artist of today, however great, could more exactly or more wisely create an image of that Energy which science must postulate behind all phenomena . . . Nature is inert, and cannot dance until Śiva wills it. He rises from His rapture, and dancing sends through inert matter pulsing waves of awakening sound, and lo! matter also dances 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 is poetry; but none the less, science.²

Coomaraswamy's training as a scientist along with his scholarly attainments enabled him to make a statement that has reverberated through the twentieth century. In 1976 Fritjof Capra in a popular combination of modern physics and Eastern mysticism gave a boost to Coomaraswamy's view.

The dance of Siva *is the dancing universe*; the ceaseless flow of energy going through an infinite variety of patterns that melt into one another.

Modern physics has . . . revealed that every subatomic particle not only performs an energy dance but also is an energy dance; a pulsating process of creation and destruction . . . For the modern physicists, then, Siva's dance is the dance of subatomic matter. As in Hindu mythology, it is a continual dance of creation and destruction involving the whole cosmos; the basis of all existence and of all natural phenomena. Hundreds of years ago, Indian artists created visual images of dancing Sivas in a beautiful series of bronzes. In our time, physicists have used the most advanced technology to portray the patterns of the cosmic dance. The bubble-chamber photographs of interacting particles, which bear testimony to the continual rhythm of creation and destruction in the

universe, are visual images of the dance of Śiva equalling those of the Indian artists in beauty and profound significance.

The metaphor of the cosmic dance thus unifies ancient mythology, religious art, and modern physics.³

While Naṭarāja appeals to the modern world through the dynamic harmony of his image, he is at the same time redolent of an elemental primitivism with his skull, snake, and the tigerskin that is usually draped around his waist. The Sanskrit scholar Ingalls remarked,

More than one element of Śiva's iconography shows traces of a primitive and probably non-Aryan origin. The matted . . . hair, . . . the ornaments of skulls and snakes, as also the wild dance in which the god is often pictured, recall the costume and practice of a tribal shaman.⁴

One notable writer on dance, Beryl de Zoete, felt unable to explain this transformation of Śiva. In her study of dance in South India, *The Other Mind*, she wrote,

How and when Śiva, the pre-Aryan deity who is associated with such savage rites and sacrifices among the primitive tribes and devil-fearing castes of South India, became the mystic dancer, the ultimate embodiment of rhythm in the visible universe of created things and in the invisible universe of the human soul, we have no means of knowing.⁵

The present book deals neither with possible scientific connotations for Naṭarāja, nor with the early development of the image, though these topics are each worthy of a book in their own right. With regard to origins, however, it is surely true that the final image gains power from the obvious presence of primitive elements. The wild shaman dressed in skins goes back a very long way in human history. In Naṭarāja the state of possession enjoyed by such figures is transmuted into the inwardly concentrated, enstatic, bliss of the Upaniṣads, though the creature beneath his feet often writhes like a subhuman ecstatic.⁶ Again, in Naṭarāja the uncoordinated prancing of the possessed shaman is transmuted into the perfect mastery of movement formulated in classical dance over a long period, and defined in a very extensive literature.

For hundreds of years prior to the Cōla bronzes Śiva was famous as a dancer, referred to as such in the *Mahābhārata*; and a wide variety of images so portrayed him. No attempt will be made here to chart the line of development of sculpture that led up to Naṭarāja, for those experimental variants were not continued once the perfect form had been achieved. The history of the literature of Dancing Śiva is more significant, in that the Tamil poets who worshipped earlier forms of dancing Śiva remain of great importance, their songs available today all over Tamilnadu on

audio cassettes, and sung daily in the temples of Śiva. They will be referred to, but are not the substance of this study.

Our subject is Naṭarāja's Dance of Bliss in Cidambaram, and this comprises three elements, which all appear in place at the same time: the Naṭarāja bronze, the Ānanda Tāṇḍava, and the historical buildings of the Cidambaram temple. The earlier Tamil poets just mentioned often sang of Śiva dancing in Cidambaram, but this was an eight-armed Śiva dancing in the burning ground. No buildings in Cidambaram are earlier than the tenth or eleventh centuries; nor are there any pre-Cōla inscriptions. The Dance of Bliss, the Ānanda Tāṇḍava, is not mentioned before the *Cidambara Māhātmya*.

What follows is an attempt to present the essentials of that Dance by concentrating on the perspective of one uniquely placed individual, Umāpati Śivācārya of Cidambaram, who flourished at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Umāpati wrote a poem in Sanskrit dedicated to the foot that Dancing Śiva lifts up for the adoration of his devotees. This poem describes the temple of Cidambaram, and gives a picture of the Śaiva universe, of the Naṭarāja universe. Umāpati was both a priest in the temple and a major figure in the history of Śaiva Siddhānta. The poetic idiom he uses is difficult for the modern reader, and requires explanation; but at the same time it is a natural, if not *the* natural, language for Hinduism. The use of this very rich and important poem, virtually unknown outside Cidambaram, provides authenticity for the present study. In addition, constant reference is made both to other relevant texts, Sanskrit and Tamil, and to sculpture and painting, all from roughly the same period. While centring on Umāpati's poem in a manner that is analogous to Umāpati's centring on Naṭarāja's raised foot, each chapter considers a different angle of the topic, often using new and unpublished material.

Chapter 1 of this book discusses the Naṭarāja bronze itself, and the following chapter analyses the myths and legends of Cidambaram. Of key importance is the great temple of Cidambaram. It is in this temple that the bronze image of Naṭarāja takes pride of place, displacing from central importance the *liṅga* that is the holy of holies in every other Śiva temple. Here in the Hall of Consciousness, the Cit Sabhā, is installed the holiest of Naṭarājas.

The temple of the Lord of the Hall, Sabhānāyaka temple, which is its official title, covers a vast area, some 16 hectares, where three rectangular courtyards within a walled garden area, one inside the other, surround the centre. Four mighty gateways, *gopuras*, guard the outer entrances.

Although the temple was referred to and visited by the saint-singers of the seventh to the ninth centuries, no building in the temple goes back beyond the eleventh century. The *gopuras* belong to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.

The Cidambaram temple is discussed in detail in chapters 3 and 4, but it would be helpful for its basic structure to be grasped from the outset. In the innermost courtyard stands the Cit Sabhā ('Hall of Consciousness') where Naṭarāja is housed. Immediately in front of this hall is another hall, the Kanaka Sabhā ('Golden Hall'), where rituals of worship are performed. A shrine to Viṣṇu is also present in this courtyard. This innermost courtyard is contained within another, where is found the temple's *liṅga* shrine. The third courtyard within which this second one is placed is gigantic, and has the immense *gopuras* as its gateways; it contains a variety of shrines and halls, and the temple tank. All this area is within a yet larger walled area taken up by gardens. The four roads beyond the temple are called Car Streets, North Car Street, East Car Street, and so on, their title coming from the fact that the festival cars progress through them. In the subsequent chapter on the Hall of Consciousness, the Cit Sabhā, central in the book just as it is in the temple, there is given what perhaps is the most detailed account yet published of this shrine.

The priests of Cidambaram, members of a hereditary group, devote themselves to the service of Naṭarāja and act as intermediaries between the God and his worshippers. Claiming a Northern origin, and different in feature from Tamilians, the priests in their gleaming white dhotis and long hair swept to one side are prominent in the centre of the city. Their historical role is discussed in chapter 3 and also in chapter 5, where Umāpati's career is considered.

Just as the inherent coherence of the image of Naṭarāja later led Coomaraswamy to attribute a scientific comprehension to its creators, so too it had earlier led the philosophers of the Śaiva Siddhānta school to connect their thought with it. The five actions (*pañcakṛtya*) of Śiva discerned by this system – creation, preservation, destruction, concealment, and grace – all came in time to be seen as expressed by Naṭarāja. Much work has been done on this school of philosophy briefly referred to by Coomaraswamy in his essay on the Dance of Śiva, though there remains a gulf between scholars working on Tamil texts, and those working on Sanskrit sources. It is now clear that the Śaiva Siddhānta school, often assumed by South Indians to be entirely South Indian in origin, was prevalent throughout much of India in the eighth to the tenth centuries, was refined and developed in Kashmir during the same period; and was

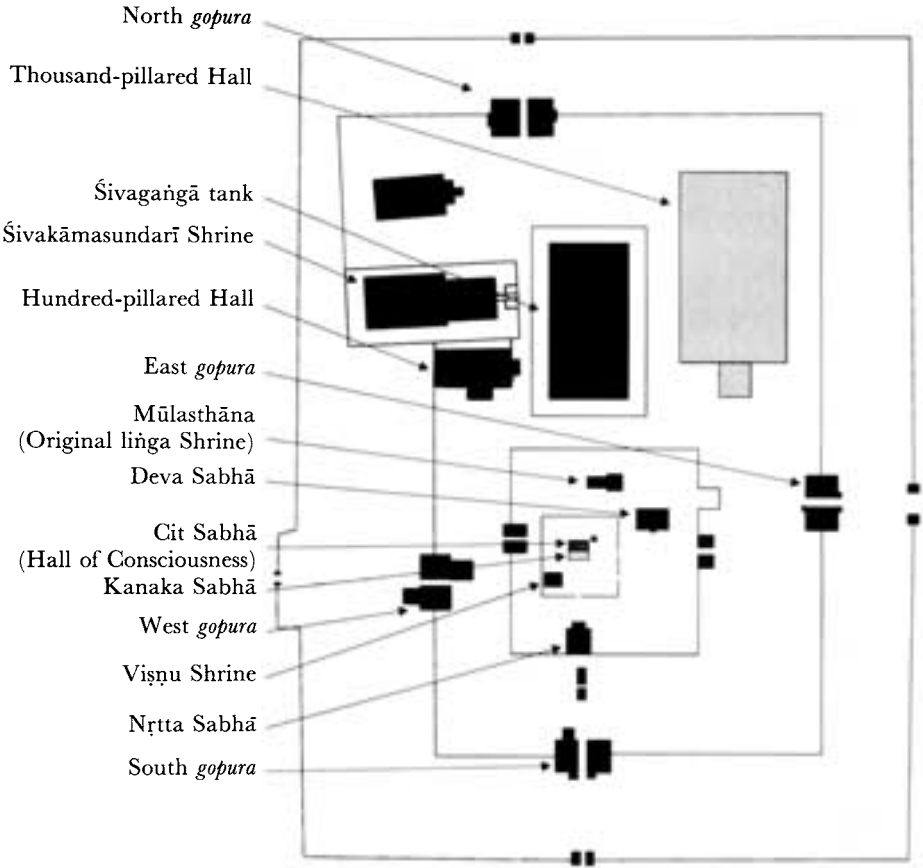


Fig. 1. Plan of Sabhānāyaka temple, Cidambaram. Principal features.

preserved and then altered in Tamilnadu. Chapter 5 considers the connections of Śaiva Siddhānta with the Dance, and also the growing influence of Vedānta.

Perhaps now outweighing Natarāja in the current Western appreciation of Hinduism is the Goddess, widely known in the form of Kālī. Both the mild and the fierce forms of the Goddess are of great importance in the worship of Natarāja in Cidambaram. Pārvaṭī, or, as she is called in Cidambaram, Śivakāmasundarī, ‘Śiva’s lovely beloved’, stands beside Śiva as a bronze image in the Hall of Consciousness; she also has her own shrine within the temple precincts. As Kālī, she has her temple on the northern outskirts of the town, where pilgrims to Cidambaram complete their visit by worshipping her. Every Natarāja bronze should be

complemented by a Śivakāmasundarī, and each pair is usually made by the same craftsman. Chapter 6 is devoted to the Goddess.

While Natarāja is, in the words of Coomaraswamy 'the clearest representation in any religion of the activity of God', he is of course only one aspect of the history of Mahādeva, the great God Śiva. Closely related to Natarāja are two other forms of Śiva, Śiva the wandering beggar, and Śiva the Terrible, Bhairava. Appreciation of these two forms is vital to a proper understanding of Natarāja. In the Southern version of Śaiva myth, it is the handsome wandering beggar who turns into the dancer, while in the North the terrifying Bhairava performs the dance, which is there always destructive. The other great Hindu God, Viṣṇu, is a kingly figure, modelled on a human king. The manifold nature of this God is expressed by his *avatāras*, themselves each essentially royal. This is true even of the cowherd Kṛṣṇa. In contrast to Viṣṇu, Śiva achieves multiplicity by the variety of roles he undertakes while maintaining the appearance of a wandering holy man.

While Hinduism now has to do without the king who is called for in so much of its ritual, the wandering ascetic remains a striking feature of the landscape, and scantily clad or naked figures with only a begging bowl and a staff or trident to their name are to be found in their thousands attending major religious events. Some men continue to make their home in the burning grounds, and maintain the tantric rituals which often verge on black magic. All the varieties of homeless wanderers have their apotheosis in Śiva, who always bears the long matted locks that are the badge of the free spirit. What must be stressed is the power of the wandering religious specialist to inspire fear and even terror, qualities to be found in the highest degree in his exemplar, Śiva. A characteristic of Cōla art, however, is its modification of the wandering beggar to bring out a compassionate beauty in this form of Śiva. Chapters 7 and 8 deal with Śiva as the Beggar and the Terrible.

There remains the human element. The Śaiva saints cannot be omitted: several are associated with Cidambaram, and the worship of all their images forms an integral part of the life of every Śiva temple in Tamilnadu. The most prominent human figures in the iconography of Cidambaram, as in many temples, are the stone carvings of dancing girls, who until this century were in the flesh key figures in the worship of the deity. The role of the male dancer seems to have been that of teacher of the dancing girls, and it might be thought that there is something essentially feminine about the dance for Hinduism. After all, another major form of Śiva is that of the half man, half woman, Ardhanārīśvara.

Śiva is inherently ambiguous. Half human, half divine are the *ganās* who accompany Śiva and often dance with him. Chapter 9 concludes with a consideration of Apasmāra and trance.

The final chapter considers the form of Umāpati's poem and his own understanding of that form. The reading of Śaivism that is made in this book is centred on Umāpati's view of Śiva, and the last words are Umāpati's.

PRINCIPAL TEXTUAL SOURCES

The primary source is *The Hymn of Praise to [Natarāja's] Curved Foot*, the *Kuñcitāṅghristava* of Umāpati Śivācārya. Written around 1300 AD, this Sanskrit poem of 313 verses is particularly wide ranging. The poem was known only to the priests of Cidambaram until it was printed for the first time in 1958. It was edited with a Tamil translation and notes by K. M. Rājagaṇeśa Dīkṣita. I am preparing for publication an edition of the text, with English translation and notes. The present study includes everything from the poem relevant to the Dance of Śiva.

Centred on Natarāja's upraised foot that grants salvation, the poem is an amalgam of philosophy, mythology, art, architecture, and ritual from a Śaiva viewpoint. Embedded in a particular place, Cidambaram in South India, and time, the fourteenth century, the poem describes the eternal dance in the heart of the world.

The best analogy for the form of Umāpati's poem is the necklace, for each verse is an individual jewel, designedly separate from those on either side. The deliberate avoidance of logical order makes the poem difficult to read for those not versed in its subject-matter.

The refrain of the poem, the conclusion to each verse, is

kuñcitāṅghriṃ bhaje

I worship Him Whose foot is curved.

The word *kuñcita*, 'curved' is a technical term for the dance step wherein the heel is raised, the toes bent down, and the middle of the foot curved.⁷

The oldest sources for the life of Umāpati are the two Sanskrit texts published in the preface to his *Bhāṣya* on the *Pauṣkarāgama*. One is the *Pārthavana Māhātmya*, in 240 *ślokas*, which claims to be the fortieth conversation between a certain Brahmānanda and his pupil Śaṅkara, in a work otherwise unknown called the *Cidambarasāra*. The site of Umāpati's *āśrama* was where Śiva, satisfied by Arjuna's penance, is said to have given him the Pāśupata weapon – the grove of Pārtha, Pārtha

being a patronym of Arjuna. The other work is the *Rājendrapura Māhātmya*, by Śivānandanātha Dīkṣita, in 108 verses. Rājendrapura, 'Emperor Town', is another name for the site of Umāpati's *āśrama*, so called presumably because Vīra Cōla built a *maṭha* there.⁸

The earliest Sanskrit text to refer to the dance of Śiva in Cidambaram is the tenth-century *Sūta Saṃhitā*, but the first and fullest account of the Dance of Bliss is given in the twelfth-century *Cidambara Māhātmya*, the subject of a detailed study by Hermann Kulke.⁹

Clearly later than the *Cidambara Māhātmya*, but otherwise indeterminate in date, are four other Sanskrit *sthalapurāṇas*: *Vyāghrapura Māhātmya*, *Hemasabhānātha Māhātmya*, *Tilvavana Māhātmya*, and *Puṇḍarikapura Māhātmya*. Of these, only the *Puṇḍarikapura Māhātmya* has been published. Much of the *Vyāghrapura Māhātmya* derives from the *Sūta Saṃhitā*, but it also devotes a chapter to the dance competition between Śiva and Kālī.

A Tamil version of the *Cidambara Māhātmya*, the *Kōyil Purāṇam*, is attributed to Umāpati Śivācārya. Apart from omissions, it follows the Sanskrit very closely. It has been translated into English by John Loud.

Two other Sanskrit texts are often referred to in this book. These are the priests' manual for daily worship, the *Patañjalipūjāsūtra*, and their Festival Ritual manual, the *Citsabheśvarotsavasūtra*; both these texts are attributed to Patañjali.