

Attire of Nataraja: Depiction in the Tamil Art till Modern Art

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Abstract

The images of Divinities in the Hindu pantheon are created on the basis of iconometric texts like *Aparajitapriccha*, *Samaranganasutradhara*, *Mansara* etc all through the country by several unknown artists. Based on these texts, artists had used various mediums like stone, metal, terracotta, and painting in different size all through the ages. Dynastic studies have been done by many scholars opting various fields; Krishna Deva, J N Bannerje, T A Gopinath Rao with their seminal work, *Temples of India*, *Development of Hindu Iconography*, *Elements of Hindu Iconography* are few. Study of attires of Hindu gods and goddess has also been attempted through iconography, which mainly includes the attributes coiffure and cognizance. This paper attempts to investigate the depiction of textile in *Nataraja* attire from its origin till modern times.

Introduction

Indian sculptural art follows the canons of *pratimalakshana* given in texts and *chitrasutra*¹ for painting. Both these sections with others form the third part of *Vishnudharmottra Purana*.² Like *Vishnudharmottra* other iconographic texts as mentioned above gives the details of image making where attributes of gods and goddesses are given, and textile is used for beautification. If one see in Indian sculptures upper and lower garment is depicted only through the trimmings. It clings to the body taking the shape of contours and can only be identified though the borderlines or pleats and folds however, in painting because of the change in medium given norms also change. In Indian art dancing *Shiva* has always been one of the exciting themes for the artist to portray. At the same time it cannot be denied that in the temples these idols are covered with extra clothing provided by the priest, knowing the fact that the icon is sculpted in the full attire. This is the kind of devotion, which people portray in the same way artists also represent idols as per their fondness and creativity, which differs from the set norms that would be discussed further through the *Nataraja* imagery.

Nataraja icon is an immense contribution of *Cholas* in Indian art which often said to be the supreme statement of Indian art.³ It is not just a mere iconic manifestation of a mythological form but also of scientific and artistic interest. Though this dancing form of *Shiva* marked its zenith during *Cholas* the epithet *Natarajawas* never used by them it first appears in an inscription of the later *Pandya* period of 13th Century CE.⁴ During *Cholas*, several other names, like *Adavallan*, was used for this form of *Shiva*. In so far as the *Nataraja* concept is concerned, the God being known in Tamil parlance as *Adavallan*, there is no evidence, sculptural or otherwise, to suggest that it had existed in any consistent role, earlier than 10th Century CE.⁵

What is Nataraja?

When *Shiva* performs *Ananda Tandav*, the dance of bliss then he is called *Nataraja*. This dance of *Shiva* culminates in the *Bhujangatrasa* mode of *Tandava*; hence the depiction of *Shiva* in *Bhujangatrasa* mode is the *Nataraja*. The other forms where the culminating mode of *Tandava* is *Lalatatilaka*, *Chatura*,⁶*Lalita*, *Urdhvajanu* etc. is not *Nataraja*. *Ananda Tandava* was popularized in Tamil region while *Sandhya Tandava*⁷ which culminates into *lalita* or *chatura* mode of *Tandava* is mostly represented in other parts of the

How Shiva conceived the form of Nataraja?

As per the *Koyil Purana* (*Cidambara Mahatmya*) which is *Sthala Purana* and other different *Purana*, the legend that is commonly accepted is as⁸: In *darukavana*, (pine forest), the heretics were full of pride and much elated at their profound learning indulging only in sacrifice refuting the existence of God. To suppress their pride, *Shiva* took the disguise of *Bhiksatana*⁹ *Visnu* escorted him as *Mohini*. The *rishi*'s were fascinated by the beauty of *Mohini*, while their wives followed *Shiva*, totally abandoning their Hermitages.

Soon the saints came to know the disguise and trick played by *Shiva*. They raised an *abhichara homa* (witchcraft) to destroy the intruder. A fierce tiger emerged from the fire, which was slain by *Shiva*. He further peeled off his skin with the nails of his fingers and wrapped it around himself as a lower garment. Then an antelope and a serpent were sent against *Shiva*, which he held them as ornaments in his hand and neck, respectively. Finally, they sent against him utilising all their ascetic powers, a monstrosity in the form of a black dwarf. On this dwarf, *Shiva* placed his sacred foot keeping him writhing on the ground and danced a blissful glorious dance, which was witnessed by all gods and goddesses. The saints were subdued, and realised their faults, and became his devotees.

Attire and its symbolic elements

*Koyil Purana*¹⁰ gives a picture of the attire of *Nataraja* and the exact measurement of the form. Salient work of T A Gopinath Rao¹¹ includes the attires of all dancing forms of *Shiva* which is primarily given in *Agamas* and *Shilpa* texts. As per that *Nataraja* should be four-armed holding *damaru* and *agni* in rear hands and right-front hand should be projected in *abhaya mudra* and left in *dandahasta* or *gajahasta mudra*. He should be standing on the back of the *Apasamara* in *kuncita pada*, while left lifted, reaching knee to the *nabhisutra* and turned towards the right leg and kept across it. Head should be adorned with *jatamukuta*, accompanied with, *dhurdhura* and *arka* flowers, a snake, jewelled ornaments, a grinning human skull and the crescent moon tied on the left side. From this *jatamukuta* there should be five, six, seven or eleven *jata* issuing in either side and should be arranged horizontally or in a circle. *Nataraja* should always be adorned with a *yajnopavita*, and an *urasutra*. The face should be smiling, and the garment must be made out of the tiger's skin. On his left shoulder, there should be an upper garment, made of tiger's skin, deerskin or very fine-textured cotton fabric. The colour of the *Nataraja* should be milky white.

The *damaru* in his right rear hand symbolises creation. He alarms us to wake us through the *damaru-nada* to perform our deeds. His right front hand in *abhaya mudra* symbolises the act of preservation. Not to fear; he is with his devotee; the only thing is that we have to be faith in him. He is always there to make his devotees free from all vices by burning them. *Agni* symbolises destruction, destruction of evil or human ignorance that is placed under the right foot of *Nataraja*. His aloft foot shows us to find the path of *mukti* that we have to follow him; then one can be free from this life cycle. The whole idea is to suggest that *Nataraja* will refuge their devotees by diminishing their ignorance and rejuvenating their mind through knowledge, and purity, and that will only happen when one will get refuge to him and follow his path.

His clustered *jata* symbolises knowledge. Matted locks suggest the spacious state which fosters knowledge. Over his *jata*, moon indicating as the guard of the treasure of knowledge. The mermaid Ganga symbolises purity, suggesting that knowledge is the only thing, which is pure and only after getting it, one can distinguish between genuine and impure, good and lousy, right or wrong. The skull over the *jatamukuta* also symbolises purity. The other suggestion is that one can achieve that supreme knowledge only passing through certain stages. When one is free from all kind of material affairs, that will be through fire and after that, he will receive the grace of Ganga then only one can be eligible to receive the supreme knowledge; that is at the peak.

All the elements in his attire except the loincloth and a scarf are symbolic. These are the only things played by the artists in the icon keeping the sanctity and purity of the form.

Depiction of textile in the attire from medieval time till modern

Most of the *Nataraja* images depicted in the *Chola* art are having the same attires; however, differences appear with the change in material. In the attire, mainly lower garment depicted, in few a scarf is also added with another piece of cloth in the belly. Together with *udarabandha*, a piece of cloth flowing towards the left of *Nataraja* can be seen. According to the scriptures, this is not mentioned, but artists have depicted in many places. Following the same, *antariya* the lower garment should be of tiger skin, but in most of the bronze sculptures, this is replaced with the fabric. In the bronze sculptures, designs and pattern can also be seen in the lower garment hence it is the textile, not the tiger skin (Fig. 1). At the same time, the cloth is represented plain, but due to the addition of various girdles; it appears that the lower garment has an appliqué border. Still, on keen observation, this could be understood well.



Fig 1. *Nataraja* bronze sculpture. 9th -12th Century CE. South India. Courtesy: Art gallery of South Australia.
Photo Courtesy: Author

Specimen preserved in the British Museum¹² and Museum of Fine Arts Boston¹³, both showcase the use of fabric in the attire. In the earlier, the loincloth is plain; however, a long sash is added over it whose loose end is waving down on the left. In the next sculpture, lines have been depicted; this could either be the pattern or the folds, teamed with a long detailed sash. *Nataraja* bronzes are full of variety concerning the representation of fabric in the attire. At one place, it is thorough while on another; it is elementary yet appealing. The same beauty can be witnessed in beautiful sculpture preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art¹⁴. Here *Nataraja* wears a loin-cloth trimmed with beaded border and to make it more appealing and balanced artists has added the same beaded edge in the waist as *katisutra*. The fabric has small four circular petaled motifs overall. Almost the same features can be seen in the *Nataraja* housed in Philadelphia museum; however, the material is devoid of any pattern.

For instance, the *Nataraja* on the North *jangha* wall of Brihadeshwar temple appears that the artist has provided embellishment to the fabric. Not only this in another sculpture of the same temple artists has provided *dhoti* as lower garment instead of loincloth or tiger skin. In the sculpture (Fig. 2) a fabric with folds covering his legs can be seen easily, which somehow changes the whole perspective. Artists had not even stopped here, the loose end of the sash also depicted at the left while the scarf his removed. It can also be said instead of flowing scarf he balances it by providing it in the waist. It is also essential to notice that even modern artist follow the same pattern for bronze *Nataraja* sculptures.



Fig 2. Nataraja on the temple wall of Brihadeshwar temple. 11th Century CE. Thanjavur, Tamil Nadu. Courtesy: Archeological Survey of India. Photo Courtesy: Author

In the art of *Cheras* who ruled mainly modern Kerala bronze *Nataraja* almost represented in the same attire as *Chola* and other dynasties of Tamil region. Still, in another popular art style which is termed as Kerala murals, *Nataraja* is hardly represented. In this art style, *Shiva* in *Sundara Tandava* with *Urdvajanu* mode is represented. However, in *Koteshwarar* temple near *Mahabalipuram* *Nataraja* is expressed in the same attire, tiger skin with the added piece of fabrics. In modern times artists are showing *Nataraja*, (can be seen in *Mayur Vihar* temple at *New Delhi*, Fig. 3) adopting the style of Kerala mural. Here the attire is changed, and both tiger skin and printed textile are put together by the artist. This attempt is acknowledging at the same time; the depth and understanding of the subject should also be required.

Coming to the *Tanjore* paintings as said earlier, the depiction is different from the bronze and stone. Here the complexion of *Nataraja* is milky white, and he is shown with tiger skin as the lower garment, with the variety and multi-coloured upper garment the added with several extended garlands. Artist must have tried to provide more rhythm and movement to the form through extending these features in the attire. However, the icon itself is sufficient to attract the gaze of the connoisseur and full of actions through his multidirectional projecting limbs. Although these features can be seen in the modern *Tanjore* paintings and company paintings, housed in *British Museum*, *London* (Fig. 4) but it cannot be denied that creativity and liberty in the depiction were prevalent during *Cholas* also.



Fig 3. Nataraja in Tanjore painting (left) and Fig. 4 Company painting (right). 18th-19th Century CE. South India. Courtesy: British Museum, London. Photo Courtesy: Author

During company period, the theme was Indian, and the technique was western. Similarly, the patronage was also western so artists must have created according to that, which brought an inevitable change in the attire which no doubt compared from the classic attire of *Nataraja*. It is evident that liberty of representation and creativity was there, but they maintained and understood the core value of the imagery and projected their art in the same way.

Conclusion

Overall, it can be said that the attire of *Nataraja* is mostly constant except for the depiction of lower and upper garment. In bronze sculptures, it is depicted in the form of the textile while in paintings tiger skin has been shown. In stone sculptures, mostly loincloth is depicted except few where dhoti is shown. Breaking all bars in modern times, both tiger skin and fabric have been portrayed falling together and changing the whole aesthetics.

References

1. Chitrasutra means the formula of making chitra, which includes painting, sculpted panels (flat at the back), and rounded sculptures. These three are termed as chitrabhasa, ardhachitra, and chitra, respectively.
2. Shah Priyabala. *Vishnudharmottra Purana*(eng trans). Delhi: Parimal Publication, 2002), 124-197.
3. Smith, David, *The Dance of Shiva Religion, art and poetry in South India*.(Cambridge: CambridgeUniversity Press, 1996), 1.
4. Soundarajan, J. *Natarajaa in South Indian art*. (Delhi: Sharada Publishing House,2004), 43-52.
5. Natrajan B. *Tillai and Natarajaa*. (Madras : Mudgala Trust, 1994), 296.
6. When the left arm is as *Ancita* (rubbing the fingers inside the palm) and the right hand is *Chatura* (second, third and fourth finger extended, the thumb placed in their centre and the little finger moved upwards) with the right foot as *Kuttita* (hitting the ground with heel) that is called as *Caturam*. Its reverse is *Lalita*.

7. Shiva performed Sandhya Tandav to amuse Parvati on mount Kailash where Brahma, Vishnu with other Gods play musical instruments, and Parvati sits on a throne. In this reference, Skand Purana gives an account on the dance of Shiva. Parvati being highly perturbed and disturbed caused by the Gods in the course of her companionship with Shiva, cursed the gods and rebuked Shiva. On the contrary, Shiva appeased her; then, she expressed two desires to be fulfilled. One was that Shiva should dance before her for a full four months in the presence of all the gods. Shiva accepted this and on the mountain Mandar right from Ashad shukla chaturadashi to Kartika shukla catauradashi Shiva performed, during which six ragas emerged from Shiva himself with their thirty-six wives and their respective mounts.
8. Smith David .*The Dance Of Śiva Religion, art and poetry in South India*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 171-175.
9. One of the form of lord Shiva where he is represented as a naked beggar.
10. Ganapati V Stahpati. *Indian Sculpture and Iconography: forms and measurements*. (Pondicherry: Published by Sir Aurbindo Institute of research in Social Sciences, 2002), 75-77.
11. Gopinath Rao, T A. *Elements of Hindu Iconography, Vol II, Part I* . (Madras: Government of Maharaja of Travancore, 1916), 224-231.
12. Nataraja. 1969.1216.1. Bronze 10th Century CE. Tamil Nadu.
13. Nataraja. 21.1829. Bronze 13th Century. South India.
14. Nataraja. 1987.80.1. Bronze 11th Century CE. Tamil Nadu.

About the Author

Saurabh Pal, has fine arts and art historical background, Bachelors' in Fine Art, specialised in painting and Masters' in Art History. In Masters his interest is towards Indian art and aesthetics guided him to focus more on Indian art, which his work also illustrates. He has worked on Nataraja and Mewar miniature paintings. At present, he is working on his doctoral thesis titled, 'Shaiva sculptures in Kalchuri period' from National Museum Institute, National Museum, Janpath which includes fieldwork of the remote areas of Bhagalpand (Rewa, Satna, Jabalpur, Saugor, Damoh etc).