

# Performance and Culture



Performance and Culture:  
Narrative, Image and Enactment in India

By

Archana Verma

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P U B L I S H I N G

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—Archana Verma  
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## INTRODUCTION

Indian performance traditions, as Farley Richmond noted, consists of many forms which would normally not be included in the West in the class of performative forms. That's because performance in India has somewhat different manifestations than it is in the West. Often, acts such as singing and dancing go together with acting. A performance in India doesn't keep these skills separate from each other. Rather, it merges them together. Because of this, there are many theatrical forms which can only be known as "dance-drama."<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there are classical dances which use acting as an integral part of them. Classical Indian dance tradition has three aspects, *Nritta* i.e. pure dance, *Nritya*, i.e., dance which shows expressions and *Natya*, or acting in the form of dance. A typical classical dance combines all three and narrates a story from one of the ancient texts. At the same time, many poses used in the performance may have been taken from the temple iconography and vice-versa. Besides, there are ancient texts composed around the theme of enactment. This has also influenced the creation of modern texts such as literature and cinematic narratives. Hence, any study of Indian performance tradition has to take into account the correlative theatrical, dance, literary and the visual forms. This helps one to understand the ways in which a narrative manifests itself in various visual, literary and performative forms, all of them integrating features from each other.

The first essay in this volume deals with dance iconography from temples and shows how it relates with the performance tradition and also with the religious ideals. With the changing religious ideals, the meaning and form of iconography also changes. In context of performance, these images, which are enacted by the dancer on stage, imitates the poses but doesn't necessarily displays the religious ideals of the ancient times. This is because the ideals themselves have changed across the long san of Indian history. Besides, images and their correlated poses can have different meanings for different groups of audience. At the same time, for some groups of audience, the images and their enactment in dance can

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<sup>1</sup> Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli. *Indian Theatre, Traditions of Performance* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1993), Introduction Chapter.

have the same meaning as in the ancient texts, if they are familiar with the ancient texts.

Milton Singer said that South Asians and perhaps all people think of their culture as encapsulated in cultural performances, which could be exhibited to themselves and others and which provided the most discrete observable units of cultural structure.<sup>2</sup> These performances can reflect the various social ideas, beliefs and practices which formulate these structures. Hence, knowledge of the social structures of these performances is imperative to understand these performances. This aspect can be seen in the essays in this volume.

On the other hand, performance can also deconstruct the social structure and norms of the society. Mikhail Bakhtin says about the carnival, “the laws, prohibitions and restrictions that determines the structure and order of ordinary, that is non-carnival life are suspended,” making carnival the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counter-posed to the all powerful socio-hierarchical relationships on non-carnival life” (Emphases in original).<sup>3</sup>

This observation about carnival can be observed in theatrical performances as well, especially in satirical and related genres. In ancient India, there evolved a special form of burlesque drama called *Bhana*, which satirised the respectful figures in society. In south India, there has evolved another form of dance-drama called Ottan Thullal, which satirises and reformulates sacred narratives in a subversive manner. The ancient theatrical form called Kutiyattam from Kerala also focused on satirising the idealised figures of the society. Often, the highest figures in society involved themselves in composing such satirical narratives, specifically meant for public performance. All of these forms mentioned above have been discussed in the present volume in the second and fourth essays.

While Kutiyattam uses more than one performer, *Bhana* and Ottan Thullal use only one actor who enacts the roles of various people he is portraying. The *Natyashastra* says about the *Bhana* that it should be performed by one person, who enacts the experiences of himself or those with whom he came in contact.<sup>4</sup> In the process of this narration of

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<sup>2</sup> Milton Singer ed. *Traditional India – Structure and Change* (Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, 1959), Xiii. See also Marvin Carlson. *Performance – A Critical Introduction* (New York/London: Routledge, 1996), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin. *Rabelais and His World* Helen Iswolsky tr. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965), 122-123. See also Marvin Carlson, 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Natyashastra*, xviii. See also S. K. De. “A Note on the Sanskrit monologue play (*Bhana*), with Special reference to *Chaturbhani*” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic*

experiences, he lampoons the social ideals.

It was long thought that India didn't have a humorous tradition, which was an erroneous view. Lee Siegel countered this view in his book titled *Laughing Matters*.<sup>5</sup> However, even more significant is the fact that these satirical traditions in Indian literature and performance attempt at reformulation of the established social ideals and even reconstruction of the sacred narratives, as has been discussed in these essays. This shows that Indian performance culture is not a static tradition. This is also noted by Farley Richmond and others, who observe that performance culture in India is not ossified and what distinguishes one tradition from the other is the flexibility and the leverage for improvisation within a particular defining framework.<sup>6</sup>

The inversion of social equation can also occur in non-satirical performances. This is brought out in the fifth and sixth essays. The fifth essay shows the inversion of social equations in the context of sacred festive theatrical forms from South India, while sixth essay deals with a reformulation of gender equations in the ritual setting within the domestic space.

Here, it is important to say that all these reversals and reformulations, in satirical or non-satirical performance forms, can occur only during the performance and doesn't necessarily lead to a major change in the social equations when the performance is over. Thus, performance culture provides an outlet to people to re-imagine their society during sacred rituals or during a purely entertaining moment. This re-imagination is often not possible in real terms outside the performance space.

The third essay discusses the sacredness as expressed in the form of erotic devotion and performance culture providing the venue for this expression. The historical evolution of eroticism in Indian religious tradition imparted to it sanctity and it was looked upon with a positive outlook. However, this underwent a change as a result of modernity and this again influenced the performance culture of the modern era. Rather than being a venue for the expression of devotional eroticism, now performance became a venue for managing eroticism along the reformulated definition of aesthetics and ideal performer in a secular environment.

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*Society* No 1 (January 1926): 63-90.

<sup>5</sup> Lee Siegel. *Laughing Matters – Comic Traditions in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1987), see reviews by Stuart Blackburn. "Laughing Matters – Comic Traditions in India by Lee Siegel" in *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 102 No. 406 (Oct-Dec 1989): 502-503 and Rupert Snell. *Bulletin of SOAS*, University of London Vol. 52 No. 3 (1989): 583-584.

<sup>6</sup> Farley Richmond et al. 4-5.

The last essay shows how a narrative can take different forms and can be remembered in different ways in different periods. The narrative can also have different meanings for the changing audiences across time and in different forms. When a narrative translates in cinematic form, it can be completely transformed to suit the audience of the modern times and may not resemble the historical narrative that began its long journey in the first place.

All of these performance forms inter-weave different media even outside the performance genres such as iconography and literature. The narration techniques change in these different forms and they also reconstruct the narrative being told in the process of performance. Besides, the ideals and social values being expressed through these performance forms also change with changing times and in different social settings. On the other hand, same social ideals may get expressed in different performance forms.

# CHAPTER I

## VISUAL LANGUAGE OF THE DIVINE DANCE – *TEXT AND IMAGE OF SHIVA’S DANCE* *SCULPTURES IN INDIAN TEMPLES*

### Introduction

Dance, like all arts in India, has been used as a mode of offering devotion to the Divine since ancient times, as a performative narrative of legends, rituals, emotive expressions and also for representing the heroic and divine figures’ instances and actions. Dancing on stage, as we know it today, has been a development of recent times. In contrast, the Indian tradition recognises the possibilities of a dance performance either with or without the presence of a spectator. The most famous dancer in Hindu mythology is Shiva, who is portrayed as dancing in the cremation ground at dusk, besmearing himself with the ash of the burning creation pyre, wearing a tiger skin and a garland of skulls. It has been suggested that this image of Shiva goes back to the earliest times in history, correlating with the animistic practice of the wild possessed shaman dressed in skins and prancing in an uncoordinated manner.<sup>1</sup> Another image of Shiva is of dancing at dusk, while his consort Parvati watches the dance performance. Often, gods and other divinities constitute the audience. The concept of the dancing Shiva gradually helped to evolve the iconography and literature of what is called the Nataraja or the ‘king of dance.’ In this form, Shiva articulates a perfect mastery of movement formulated in the texts of classical dancing.<sup>2</sup> This dance is named the *Tandava* and is often interpreted as the Cosmic Dance of Shiva. Through this dance, he creates, sustains, destroys and regenerates the universe, thus controlling the Cosmic cycle. While *Tandava* is a violent form of dance, his consort the Goddess dances in the *lasya* mode, which is softer and perceived as

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<sup>1</sup> David Smith. *The Dance of Siva Religion, Art and Poetry in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 3.

<sup>2</sup> David Smith. 3.

feminine.<sup>3</sup> This categorisation of the masculine divine power controlling the universe through a violent dance and the consort dancing in a softer mode produces a hierarchised imagery of the male and the female loci of the divine power. The only goddess who matches Shiva's violent dancing capacity is Kali, who abides outside the folds of the ordered society. Tamil popular legend however, subdues even Kali to Shiva in a dancing contest, according to which Kali lost the contest and therefore, conceded the right to claim the devotees' worship to Shiva, accepting her exile from the human settlements.

The theme of Shiva's dance and the associated legends have generated an extensive body of images in temple iconography, where Shiva is depicted as dancing, being watched by the Goddess and other deities of the Hindu pantheon. The fact that these images are carved on the temple walls also includes the viewer as part of the audience of Shiva's dance. These dancing images of Shiva are called *Nrittamurtis* in Sanskrit. This paper deals with three forms of these dancing images of Shiva, mostly from the Peninsular India, covering a span of 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> c. C.E. here and dwells on the ways in which the dance of the deity creates equations of power and mediation of these equations through these sculptures.

## Historiography and Concept

Before elaborating upon this theme, I would like to discuss in brief the nature of historiography that already exists in relation to the dancing images of Shiva. One of the earliest and amongst the most significant scholars to write about this theme was Ananda Coomaraswamy in his famous work *The Dance of Shiva*, in which he portrayed Shiva as the omnipotent god who controlled the Cosmic Cycle through his violent dance called the *Ananda Tandava*.<sup>4</sup> It must be mentioned here that by doing so, he was really countering the European construction of the Indian culture as 'feminine' and therefore, 'passive'. Coomaraswamy's concerns, thus, went beyond the aim of studying the Indian art as he attempted to show through the image of a powerful, omnipotent deity that the Indian cultural signifiers were capable of presenting themselves as 'masculine' and 'forceful' as well. I use these terms in quotes, as this binary construction of the 'masculine' as 'dynamic' and the 'feminine' as 'passive'

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<sup>3</sup> C. Shivaramamurti. *Nataraja in Art, thought and Literature* (New Delhi: National Museum, 1974): 11.

<sup>4</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy. *The Dance of Shiva* (New York: The Sunwise Turn, Inc, 1924 1<sup>st</sup> published 1918).



itself has undergone a change since the days of Coomaraswamy. Around the same time, T. A. Gopinath Rao presented an extensive survey of the Hindu images extant in the numerous rock-cut and structural temples and their possible relation with the Sanskrit texts.<sup>5</sup> This was essentially an attempt to bring awareness to the people – Indian and European – about the repository of iconographic heritage that existed in India. In this work he included the *Nataraja* images of Shiva from major sites. His work became a major source of reference of Hindu iconography and continues to be so. Much later, J. N. Banerjea followed his style of iconographic study in English in *The Development of the Hindu Iconography*<sup>6</sup> and Marutinandan Tiwari and Kamal Giri did so in Hindi in their *Madhyakalina Bharatiya Pratimalaksana*.<sup>7</sup> Stella Kramrisch attempted to show the spiritual strength of the Indian culture, as also the multiplicity of forms in which the Hindu society was capable of conceiving of the divinity in visual and literary forms, using Shiva's imageries as a cultural signifier in her study of the Cave Temples of Ellora and Elephanta in the *Presence of Shiva* and also in *Manifestations of Shiva*.<sup>8</sup> Among the archaeological works, J. C. Harle made an extensive study of the temple gateways in South India, which, among other images, use the motif of dancing images.<sup>9</sup> Douglas Barrett made an extensive survey of the evolution of the *Nataraja* image in South India, by studying the extant images from the numerous temple sites in the region.<sup>10</sup> His mainly archaeological and epigraphical approach was followed by Anne-Marie Gaston, who combined the archaeological evidences with the legends associated with Siva in the various literary texts.<sup>11</sup> To this tradition may also be added T. Satyamurti's work on the *Nataraja* temple at Chidambaram, which

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<sup>5</sup> T. A. Gopinath Rao. *The Elements of Hindu Iconography* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1993 New Edition).

<sup>6</sup> Jitendra Nath Banerjea. *The Development of Hindu Iconography* (Calcutta: Calcutta University Press, 1956).

<sup>7</sup> Marutinandan Tiwari and Kamal Giri. *Madhyakalina Bharatiya Pratimalaksana* (Varanasi: Vishvavidyalaya Prakashan, 1997).

<sup>8</sup> Stella Kramrisch. *The Presence of Shiva* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981); *Manifestations of Siva* (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of art, 1981 New Editions).

<sup>9</sup> James C. Harle. *Temple Gateways in South India: The Architecture and Iconography of the Chidambaram Gopurams* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1963).

<sup>10</sup> Douglas Barrett. "The Dancing Shiva in Early South Indian Art" in *The Sixth Annual Mortimer Wheeler Archaeological Lecture, Proceedings of the British Academy* Vol. LXII (1976).

<sup>11</sup> Anne-Marie Gaston. *Shiva in Dance, Myth and Iconography* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).

combines the legends associated with the temple and the art and architecture.<sup>12</sup> B. Natarajan has compiled and published the various legends popular in South India, related to the dance of Shiva and associated with the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram. These legends have been mainly taken from the popular temple *Mahatmyas*, which were written down in the mediaeval period, though they may have been in currency in the oral form earlier.<sup>13</sup> In a different key is the work edited by Fred Clothey and J. Bruce Long, which explores the various devotional, ritualistic and the social aspects of the Shaivite devotionism in South India by emphasising the philosophical context of the *Shaiva Siddhanta* and other aspects of Shaivism.<sup>14</sup> A special mention needs to be made in this work of the essay by Jean Filliozat who dwells on the role of *Shaivagamas* in the *Shaiva* ritual system.<sup>15</sup> In an attempt to provide a socio-ritualistic context to the icons, David Smith studies the dancing image of Shiva in the context of the socio-religious aspects of the Shaivism during the later Chola and post-Chola periods.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, R. Champakalakshmi adds a political dimension to the study of the dancing Shiva in the Tanjavur paintings, by correlating the divine image with the royal image of Rajaraja I, the royal patron of the temple.<sup>17</sup> The study of the dancing image of Shiva has thus, traversed a long trajectory from being symbolic of the dynamism of Indian culture to being a signifier of the political power of its royal patron. As stated earlier, this paper deals with the concept of Shiva's dance as negotiating the equation between the dancer, the spectators and the devotees. Needless to say, these equations are located in the socio-cultural matrix in which they are formed. In this context, the observation made by Erin Striff is very important, who says that in performing art, the performers themselves become the text to be read.<sup>18</sup> Although this is not a paper on performative arts, the iconology of a dance performance in visual arts too makes the dancer's image a visual –

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<sup>12</sup> T. Satyamurti. *The Nataraja Temple: History, Art and Architecture* (New Delhi: Classical Publication, 1978).

<sup>13</sup> B. Natarajan. *Tillai and Nataraja* (Madras: Mudgala Trust, 1994) as also *The City of the Cosmic Dance* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1974).

<sup>14</sup> Fred W. Clothey and J. Bruce Long eds. *Experiencing Siva: Encounters With a Hindu Deity* (Columbia: Mo South Asia Books, 1983).

<sup>15</sup> Jean Filliozat. "The Role of Saivagamas in the Saiva Ritual System" in Fred Clothey and J. Bruce Long eds. 81-86.

<sup>16</sup> See note 1 above.

<sup>17</sup> R. Champakalakshmi. "New Light on the Tanjore Frescoes" in *Journal of Indian History* Golden Jubilee Volume (1973).

<sup>18</sup> Erin Striff ed. *Performance Studies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003): Introduction.

and cultural – text to be read and visualised by the spectators. Here, it must also be added that not only is the performer – or his image – a text to be read, but the performance itself may be visualised as a text to be read. At this point, some observations may be made regarding the term ‘iconology.’ This term has been used with multiple meanings in critical literary discourses. However, this paper intends it in the context of visual arts and hence, doesn’t take into account the literary employments of this term. The term ‘iconology’ is derived from ancient Greek and Latin roots and was used in 1593 by Cesare Ripa in his work titled *Iconologia*,<sup>19</sup> in the sense of the verbal descriptions of images taken from the Antiquity and elsewhere.<sup>20</sup> By 1644, this term began to assume the overt meaning of an “explanation of pictures, emblems and other hieroglyphic figures.”<sup>21</sup> Thereafter, throughout the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the connotation of iconology as the explanation of religious pictures provided a religious accent to the term, as in the *Iconologia Decorum* of Joachim von Sandrart (published in 1680), in which he dealt with the Greco-Roman and Christian images.<sup>22</sup> Erwin Panofsky in 1939 reinterpreted the term in his *Studies in Iconology*.<sup>23</sup> He believed that there were three levels of reading works of art – primary or natural, secondary or conventional and finally, intrinsic or symbolic, the last always lay in the cultural context. He applied iconography to the second level and iconology to the third, as these respectively required the techniques of analysis usually of visual symbols and synthesis, usually of the works of art in their cultural context. He never devised a word to describe the first level, during which the identification and correct naming of the elements had to occur.<sup>24</sup> I should stress that while my usage of the term iconology is taken over from Panofsky, I prefer to reinterpret this term for the purpose of my own specific research, as my usage of this term takes into account not only the second level of Panofsky i.e., the analysis of the images in relation to their textual and archaeological sources, but also of their contextual study leading to their specific symbolic meanings.

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<sup>19</sup> Cesare Ripa. *Iconologia* (Rome: Heredi di Gio Gigliotti, 1593):. 326; cited by Thomas Heck. (see note 20 below): fn 2.

<sup>20</sup> See a detailed analysis of this study in Thomas F. Heck. *Picturing Performance – The Iconography of the Performing Arts in Concepts and Practice* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1999): 8-25.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas F. Heck. 11 (see fn 14 for a reference of an engraving).

<sup>22</sup> Thomas Heck. fn 17.

<sup>23</sup> Erwin Panofsky. *Studies in Iconology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939).

<sup>24</sup> Panofsky. 25.

## *Shiva Nrityamurtis – A Study*

The first group of images elaborates the concept of Shiva as dancer being watched by Parvati (or Uma), his consort. According to the legend, Śiva danced for her pleasure and all the gods accompanied him. This is called the *Sandhyanrittya* or the Evening Dance of Shiva.<sup>25</sup> These images were greatly popular in pre-Chola period i.e., in 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> century C. E. in both Deccan and South India. One of the finest of these images comes from the Ravula Phadi Cave at Aihole in Karnataka, where Shiva is dancing in his eight-armed form alongwith Ganesha, *Saptamatrukas* etc. (fig. 1). Parvati watches him from his left side. A more finely carved image of this form is found nearby outside the Badami Cave I, where Shiva is sixteen armed and Ganesha and other figures are accompanying him in dance. This image shows something striking - Shiva is wearing the Tamil warriors' anklet on the right leg (fig. 2), which was worn as a sign of bravery in war in early Tamil society. Here, Shiva is depicted not only as the dancing god, but also as a warrior deity. The notion of dance as a source of pleasure and also as an act located in the context of war emerges through this image.

The motif of a consort 'watching' while the powerful god dances to 'please' her at once delineates the polar opposite roles for the two deities – the goddess is passive, yet needs to be propitiated while the god is powerful and is the Cosmic Actor in the act of dancing. The divine spectators watch this dance in adoration. The stage thus, defines the image of each participant – the dancer is the dynamic force, while the spectators legitimise this force through the action of 'gazing'; and the divine consort mediates between the two through her dual roles of a deity seeking propitiation and a member of the adoring audience.

The motif of the goddess watching the dance of Shiva has been exploited in another sculpture from the Tamil region. The *Natyashastra* by Bharata refers to this dance pose as '*Lalatatilakam*' (i.e., the pose marking

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<sup>25</sup> The *Shiva Pradosha Stotra* says, "Placing the Mother of the Three Worlds (i.e., Parvati) upon a golden throne, The god holding a trident dances on the heights of the Kailasha mountains and all the gods gather around him – Saraswati the goddess of learning plays on the *Vina*, Indra the king of gods on the flute, Brahma the creator holds the time marking cymbals, Lakshmi the goddess of fortune begins a song, Vishnu plays on a drum and all the gods stand round about." Quoted by A. K. Coomaraswamy. *The Dance of Shiva* (New York: The Sunwise Turn, Inc, 1924 1<sup>st</sup> published 1918): 55-56.

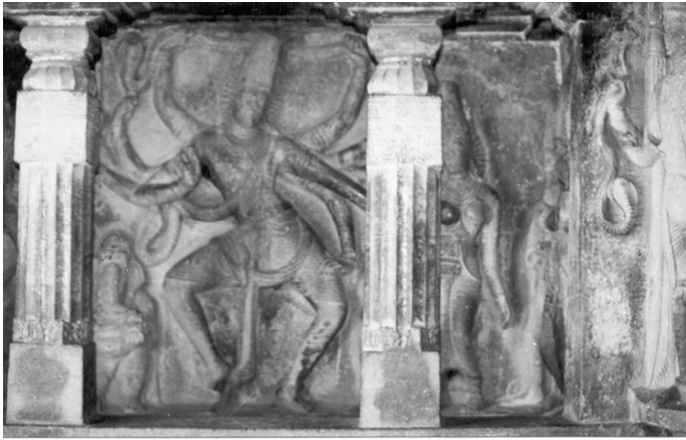


Figure 1.

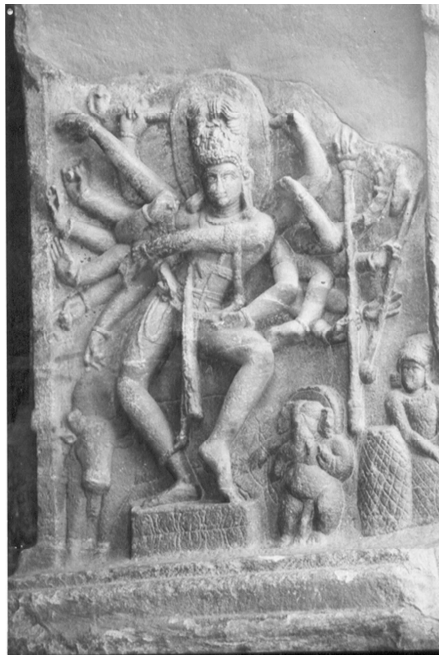


Figure 2.

the forehead with the auspicious mark called '*tilaka*').<sup>26</sup> It has been mistakenly called by the scholars as the '*Urdhva Tandava*' (or the *Tandava* dance with the lifted leg). Since Bharata gives a complete description of this pose, the term *Urdhva Tandava* seems to be a coinage of recent origins and therefore, a misnomer for the images datable to the 8<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> c C.E.

*Lalatatilakam* images show Shiva lifting his right leg straight upwards parallel to his torso and one of his left arms go up and the hand touches the crown. One of the right arms of Shiva winds his lifted leg and makes the *abhaya* gesture. Some of the earliest of these images are found at Kanchipuram (Fig. 3), while some of the later figures of this dance form are from Chidambaram (Fig. 4), the Shiva temple at Vellore in North Arcott District and Tribhuvanam, among others. In all the above images, Shiva is depicted alone and not with Kali, as is described in the Tamil popular legend described below.

Here, it is important to discuss the issue which is associated with these images. The reason why these images were thought to represent the *Urdhva Tandava* is that it has often been suggested that these images refer to the Tamil myth of the dance contest between Shiva and Kali in which the right to command popular worship was decided by the efficiency at dance. Shiva defeated Kali by lifting his leg during the contest. Though Kali was capable of imitating the pose, chose not to follow him, as it violated her feminine modesty and she did not want to transgress its norms. She was thereby exiled to the outskirts of the town and the temple was dedicated to Shiva's worship. This myth relates to Chidambaram and the Tiruvalankatu temples and is recorded in the temple texts called the *Sthalapurana*, datable to the 14<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. and written to eulogise the sacred significance of the temples.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Bharata's *Natyashastra* describes at least two poses which agree with the images being discussed here. Out of a total of 108 *karanas* or poses, the 50<sup>th</sup> *karana* named '*Lalatatilakam*' says that the leg should be lifted up and the great toe of that foot should touch the forehead as if making a '*tilaka*.' The dancer often also touches his forehead with his palm to suggest that this is the *Lalatatilakam* pose. The 64<sup>th</sup> *karana* called *Nishumbhita* says the leg is lifted, the chest is elevated and the palm is placed in the *tilaka* pose. The images illustrated above have originated from these two *karanas*. See Venkata Narayana Swami et al. *Tandavalaksanam* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1991 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1936): 98, verses 111 and 125.

<sup>27</sup> David Smith feels that though *Chidambara Mahatmya* is a 12<sup>th</sup> century text, its final version is datable to Umapati Shivacharya's time i.e., around 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D., as he wrote the *Kunchitanghrastava* around 1300 A.D. According to David Smith, *Vyaghrapura Mahatmya Sthalapurana* is still later than the *Chidambara*



Figure 3.

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*Mahatmya*, which devotes a chapter on the dance contest between Shiva and Kali. The Tamil version of the *Chidambara Mahatmya* is the *Koil Purana*, attributed to Umapati Shivacharya. See Smith. 8 – 9; 44 – 45.



Figure 4.

There are however, problems in accepting this myth as the basis of the *Lalatatilakam* images. First, an extensive survey of these images from across the South India reveals that almost none of the panels has Kali in the defeated pose. A study of the Tamil texts of the 6<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> centuries C.E. also reveals that while other legends related to Shiva's exploits are described in these texts, the legend of the contest occurs nowhere in the texts. It seems legitimate to expect that the woman saint Karaikkal Ammaiyar's poetry would refer to this contest, if not of other poets, since according to the legend, she was 'directed by Shiva' to stay at Tiruvalankatu and 'witness his dance' there. A study of her poems however, shows that she has written specially on Shiva's various acts in her work called '*Atputat-Tiruvantati*'<sup>28</sup> The legend of the dance contest is

<sup>28</sup> S. Sasivalli. *Karaikkal Ammaiyar* (Madras: International Institute of Tamil Studies, 1984): 32, 33, 54, verses 25, 15, 80.



however, conspicuous by its absence in this text. When she writes about Shiva's dance which she 'witnesses', she says, "In forest the mysterious god is dancing, the daughter of the mountain king is in fear glancing."<sup>29</sup> It is significant that Kali's contest with him is not mentioned and it is also significant that wherever Shiva is accompanied by the goddess in the panels mentioned above, it is Parvati watching him and not Kali contesting him. The '*Lalatatilakam*' images thus, depict Shiva's dance being watched by Parvati, as is described by Karaikkal Ammaiyar who was closer in time to these images than the *sthalapuranas*.

Even a text as late as the *Periya Puranam* (i.e., 12<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) describes Shiva's dance at Tiruvalankatu as being watched by Karaikkal Ammaiyar. In the words of Chekkilar, the composer of *Periya Puranam*, she describes the dance in these words – "Tiruvalankatu is the place, where our Father with his matted locks swinging, in all the eight directions, dances the fire dance to the delight of his limbs in the fiery cremation ground./..."<sup>30</sup> There is no reference to the contest here, nor is the presence of Kali as a rival mentioned.

The myth of the contest as the basis of the *Lalatatilakam* images is refuted by the overwhelming evidence of the sculptural panels themselves. As said earlier, nowhere is this form of Shiva accompanied by a defeated Kali. Either he dances alone, referring to the *Periya Puranam* description above, or Parvati watches his dance, as described by Karaikkal Ammaiyar. Besides, there is a profusion of sculptural panels which depict *female* dancers lifting their legs and touching their head with one foot, exactly as the Shiva images. It is interesting that Chidambaram, the other centre said to be associated with the dance contest, has maximum number of these female - dancer panels (Figs. 5, 6 and 7). Also, the Chidambaram panel of *Lalatatilakam* shows Shiva dancing alone, not with Kali. It is obvious that at least till the creation of Chidambaram temple gateways, there was no sense of immodesty associated with a woman lifting her leg, as the female dancers lifting their leg are depicted on the Chidambaram gateways. The myth was not only *not* associated with Shiva's images, it was unknown to the temple artists at Chidambaram and other places.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Sasivalli. 58, *Mutta Tirru Patikam*, verses 2-8.

<sup>30</sup> G. Vanmikanathan condensor and N. Mahalingam general editor. *Periya Puranam by Sekkizhaar* (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1985): 537.

<sup>31</sup> I am grateful to Late Dr. F. L. Hernault, Director, École Française d' Extrême-Orient, Pondicherry and Late Mr. N. Sethuraman, Director, Raman and Raman Co, Kumbhakonam who cross-examined my argument and endorsed that I was following the right track of analysis. Mr. Sethuraman also pointed out that



Figure 5.



Figure 6.

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classical dancers as far as he knew, did not subscribe to the concept of ‘immodesty’ associated with this pose.



Figure 7.

In the above context, it is enlightening to read the legend of the dance of Shiva and Kali as given in the *Linga Purana*, a text of Shaivism:

“(After Kali killed the demon Daruka), in order to propitiate her anger, the delighted trident bearing lord of the *devas* performed the *Tandava* dance at dusk along with the ghosts and leaders of spirits.... After enjoying the dance of Shiva very much, the Goddess (i.e., Kali) danced in the midst of ghosts happily along with her attendant *yoginis*. Gods all around, including Brahma, Indra and Vishnu, bowed to Kali, eulogised her and then prayed to the Goddess. Thus, *Tandava* of the trident bearing lord has been briefly mentioned.”<sup>32</sup>

This text accommodates various themes of the Evening Dance described in the opening part of this paper and makes the position of the various participants in the act of dance explicit. Kali is the malevolent deity who really lies beyond the realm of the ordered society, living with the spirits in the cremation ground, feeding on flesh and blood and walking naked, wearing a garland of skulls. In a sense, she embodies the woman beyond the circumscriptive norms of the society. Here, she asserts her space on the dance stage by commanding propitiation from the god in

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<sup>32</sup> J. L. Shastri ed. *Linga Purana* Vol. 6 Part II (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidss, 1990 Reprint): 581.

the form of a dance performance and praise from the other gods. She expresses her contentment in the form of another dance performance by herself. In effect, she is not to be subdued by the great god's dynamic force. On the other hand, Shiva's consort Parvati plays a passive role. She depicts the subdued spouse, living within the norms of the society.<sup>33</sup>

A remarkable feature in the beginning of the legend is that Shiva performed this dance in order to propitiate Kali's anger. The accent here is on pleasing a companion and the element of conflict between the two divinities is not present. The Tamil popular legend however, changes the equation and uses the motif of contest to show the hierarchy of two deities, inverting the powerful image of Kali and compelling her to acquire a subdued and defeated image. The *Linga Purana* and the sculptured dance panels reflect the complexity of power equations between various divine figures, often delineating their actions according to their role in these power equations, their image not necessarily within the prescribed norms of the social order. The popular narrative however, uses the motif of dance to underline the gender equations between the male and the female figures along strictly hierarchised lines. This is a case of an idea flowing from the visual medium of the sculpture to the oral medium of the popular narrative in a transformed state and finally, the folk response getting encoded in the *Sihalapuranas* which were written down in the mediaeval period.

The above two groups of Shiva's *Nrittamurtis* (i.e., the dancing images of Shiva) thus exploit the motif of the dance stage to define the placement of the participants through an elaboration of the theme of Shiva's dance at dusk viewed by Parvati. This idea was further evolved in the third group of sculptures of Shiva's dance, represented by the form commonly known as Nataraja (Fig. 8). To the narrative aspect was added the perception of Shiva as the creator, sustainer and the destroyer of the universe through his dance (*Srishti* i.e., creation of the universe, *Sthiti* i.e., preservation, *Samhara* i.e., destruction, *Tirobhava* i.e., dissolution and *Anugraha* i.e., release to create afresh the Universe being the five stages of this cycle). The image of Nataraja in this sense does more than merely narrating the dance event. It uses the dance to install Shiva as the supreme divine power – there is no longer a need for a trinity of gods,<sup>34</sup> since all the cosmic roles have been assigned to Shiva through the icon of Nataraja.

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<sup>33</sup> For a detailed study of the various aspects of the roles played by these goddesses, see John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff eds. *The Divine Consort* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1984).

<sup>34</sup> Traditionally in the Hindu mythology, Brahma is the creator, Vishnu the preserver and Shiva the destroyer of the Universe.



Figure 8.

The ‘Nataraja posture’ is also called *Ananda Tandava*, though Coomaraswamy<sup>35</sup> calls it *Nadanta* as opposed to the *Tandava* which Shiva dances in the cremation ground. In this paper, the term *Ananda Tandava* has been used for the dance of Nataraja, as it is the common usage for this dance. The posture of Nataraja is not included in the 108 *Karanas* i.e., poses of the *Natyashastra*. Rather, it is a combination of various postures described in that text and the *Agamas*. The hand postures called the *Gajahasta*, as described for four-armed images by the *Kashyapashilpam* of the *Anshumadbhedagama* had already appeared at Badami and Pattadakal in Karnataka and at Kanchipuram. To this was added the leg postures which appear in the 24<sup>th</sup> *Karana* called *Bhujangatrassa* of the *Natyashastra* (Figs. 9, 10 and 11). These elements form the basic figure of Nataraja of the earliest phase. It was gradually perfected and elaborated through the 9<sup>th</sup> – 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nataraja was one of the most important icons which received

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<sup>35</sup> A. K. Coomaraswamy. 57.



Figure 9.



Figure 10.