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# Nataraja – A Symbol of Harmony and Beauty in Nature

Souraja Tagore

*Before I leave, rouse my heart with the swing of thy dancing feet,  
the swing that wakens stars in the deep of night,  
frees the stream from the rocky cave,  
gives voice to clouds in thunder and rain...*

*Rabindranath Tagore<sup>1</sup>*

Ancient man was entirely dependent on Mother Nature to provide him with food and shelter. Therefore he began to observe her daily rhythms and seasonal cycles along with the recurring heavenly phenomena in order to understand the virtues of nature. The unexplainable phenomena within nature's myriad behaviours being not entirely comprehended by man encouraged him to name the different phenomena which, with the passage of time, translated into the names of various gods each associated with a phenomena or behaviour. As man progressed in time many of these Gods faced extinction while some managed to survive the ravages of time and still remain with us. One such is Nataraja, The Lord of Dance or The Lord of Actors. Nataraja is perhaps one of the most important and visually thrilling forms of the Hindu god Shiva. Appearing for more than a thousand years Nataraja's importance continues to exist not only as a temple deity or an idol worshipped by artists (especially

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<sup>1</sup> Rabindranath Tagore 'Poems' (poem no. 86) in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, Vol 1, Poems*, Sisir Kumar Das eds. ( New Delhi: Sahitya Academi, 2004) Pg. 363

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dancers), but also as a popular icon representing Indian tradition and cosmic principles.<sup>2</sup>

From ancient texts, manuscripts and other ancillary sources, one understands that Indian civilization was born on the lap of the forests.<sup>3</sup> The forests assisted her in acquiring a distinct character and spirit. The people of India were always surrounded by nature, fed and clothed by her and they had the closest and most constant intercourse with nature's varying aspects. The constant presence of nature within the environs of man enriched and encouraged his mind and helped him progress with nature in harmony. His mind became free from the desire to extend his domain by erecting boundary walls around his acquisitions. His aim was not to acquire, but to realise his surroundings and dwell in harmony with nature while appreciating its wonders and beauty.<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently man advanced from his primeval forest culture and adapted to developments of wealthy cities and modern concrete civilization. With the rapid advancement of technology and science, man became ignorant towards the importance of the preservation of nature and environments without which he would not survive. Today man works against nature rather than with it thereby seriously jeopardizing the wellbeing of both himself and the planet at large. He nurtures the idea that nature exclusively belongs to beasts and inanimate things. He considers everything that is low in the scale of being as merely nature while whatever has the stamp of perfection in it, be it intellectual or moral, is acknowledged as existing in the domain of the human. But this is a fairly recent development, for the

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2 See Padma Kaimal (1999) Shiva Nataraja: Shifting Meanings of an Icon, *The Art Bulletin*, 81:3, 390-4193

3 See Alvina McCormick: *The Mystery of Creation* (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2007), pg. 47

4 This is a standard anthropological development explained at <<http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Hunter-gatherer>> accessed on 6.7.2015

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Indian mind never had (nor should have) any hesitation in acknowledging its kinship with nature.

The Indian iconographic representation of the Nataraja is perhaps one of the most significant symbols of the relationship between man and nature signifying the coexistence of man with the elements of nature resulting in his physical and spiritual emancipation.<sup>5</sup> The form of the icon of Nataraja which has gained popularity and familiarity was a canonical figure that was formed roughly during the tenth century AD as a series of bronze sculptures created through the later portion of the Chola period. It was this version of the image that Ananda K. Coomaraswamy frequently referred in his book *The Dance of Shiva*.<sup>6</sup> In this form, Shiva is portrayed as a four armed figure dancing within a ring of fire. He stands on his deeply bent right leg while his slightly flexed left leg lifts to waist height and crosses the hips. Parallel to the dramatic transverse line of the lifted leg, one of his four arms crosses the body in a relaxed *gajahasta* (elephant hand) suspended above an equally relaxed ankle. One of his right hands is placed just above the loose wrist in the *abhaya mudra* (open palm gesture). Behind these boldly disposed limbs, the hips twist slightly to Shiva's right but the torso remains straight. Long, matted tresses stream outwards from Shiva's head. On his right, among these locks sits a diminutive personification of the river Ganga, her body human above the waist and piscine below. She presses her palms together in *anjali mudra* (respectful address), while a crescent moon, the *datura* (a flower sacred to Shiva) and a cluster of spiky *kondrai* leaves crown Shiva's topknot. Shiva stands on *apasmara purusha* (the prostrate body of an imp or dwarf like figure).

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5 Heinrich Zimmer (1946), *Myth and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization* Bollingen Series VI (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972)

6 See Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva: Essays on Indian Art and Culture* (New York: Dover Publications: 1985).



ICONOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION  
OF LORD NATARAJA

Bronze , South Indian , Chennai Art Gallery <sup>7</sup>

While the above is a popular iconographic representation of Nataraja, the image had been conceived by artists based on a legend faithfully narrated in the *Chidambara Mahatmyam: The Greatness of the Supreme Divine Lord Nataraja*<sup>8</sup> by E. A. Sivaraman. According to the legend, once a number of sacrilegious sages lived in a pine forest and practiced rituals without any genuine devotion to Shiva. Shiva, dressed as a handsome ascetic along with Vishnu dressed as an enchantress Mohini,

descended on earth to teach them a lesson. While Vishnu-Mohini seduced the sages, Shiva did the same to their respective wives. Eventually the two Gods and their followers met in the depth of the forest where the sages were shocked and infuriated to find their naked wives sporting amorously with the ascetic. Finally on discovering the real identity of the young ascetic, they plotted to kill Shiva. With the help of magic they organised an elaborate ceremony from the sacrificial flame of which emerged a huge tiger. It pounced on Shiva to tear him to pieces but before it could do any harm, the Lord skinned it with the nail of his little finger and donned its skin. Next the

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<sup>7</sup> See <<http://www.lotussculpture.com/mm5/graphics/00000001/1-bronze-nataraj-stature-32inches.jpg>> accessed on 6.7.2015

<sup>8</sup> E.A. Sivaraman, *Chidambara Mahatmyam: The Greatness of the Supreme Divine Lord Nataraja* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1993). This is a translation of Chidambaram Annaswamy Iyer's Tamil verse.

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magical flame yielded a trident which Shiva caught in mid air and held tightly in his right hand. Following this a furious antelope rushed towards Shiva in an attempt to gore him but the lord caught it in his left hand. The perplexed sages created a number of snakes that Shiva draped on his hair and body as ornaments. A gang of demons followed but Shiva soon turned them into his supporters. A grinning skull jumped out of the fire pit which Shiva placed into his matted hair as a crown. Next the sages made an hourglass shaped drum or *damaru* to deafen Shiva with its sound. The *damaru* found its rightful place in Shiva's hand. Finally the sages made a deformed dwarf, an ignorant man without memory, to attack the lord. Shiva stepped on the back of the dwarf and breaking his neck danced on him the dance of bliss with the ring of fire around him and his mated hair flowing in the air. Though the image of Nataraja that we usually see does not usually have the complete details incorporated in the image (obviously to preserve the artistic beauty and balance in sculpture), they are definitely inspired from the myths and legends associated with the Lord.<sup>9</sup>

The iconographic representation of Nataraja undoubtedly has profound symbolic significance which is philosophical but at the same time the image can also be studied as an emblem of harmony in nature and man's natural kinship with its beauty resulting from such harmonious coexistence. It is interesting to note the five elements intricately synchronised into a single nataraja image. It represents man's intrinsic relationship with the *Panchabhuta* and in turn the nature within and around which man dwells and thrives.<sup>10</sup> The five elements namely Earth or *Prithvi*; Water or *Jal* ; Fire or *Agni*; Air or *Vayu* and then Ether or *Akasha* have individual characters of their

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9 For a detailed discussion on this area, see Joseph Campbell, *The Mythic Image* (New York: MJF Books, 1996),pg. 118 and Coomaraswamy (1985), pg. 65

10 See Gautam Chatterjee, *Panchabhuta* at <<http://www.ibiblio.org/gautam/hind0003.htm>> accessed on 20.6.2015

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own, the union of which leads to the formation of life. Nataraja is perhaps a representation of that life which if detached from the elements and their natural amalgamation leads to mayhem and ultimately death.

Earth or *prithvi* is one of the elements that can be touched as well as smelled. However, there are two types of earth one being eternal or *nitya* which are in the form of atom *paramanu*. The other is perishable *anitya* which exists in the form of *karya* or work the results of which are specially seen in the animate and inanimate levels. It is the latter which finds prominence in the image of Nataraja in form of the Snake (a reptile that crawls on earth), the Tiger (symbolised through its skin that the lord bears) and the antelope that he sometimes hold in one of his hands. The most prominent representation of the element earth may be found in the *apasmara purusha* on whose dwarfish and disfigured body Nataraja stands gracefully in complete balance signifying equilibrium in nature.

Water or *jal* is the second element which similarly has two characters. The eternal or *nitya* form of water exists in the form of molecules while the *karya* or *anitya* form exists as oceans, rivers and various water bodies which are perishable. Water from the sea or river evaporates to form clouds, which eventually comes down as rain on earth. So the eternal molecule only changes its *karya* or shape of work and what we see is the perishable form. It is that form which finds its due place on Nataraja's head as Ganga. While Shiva dances, from his matted locks flow the sacred river Ganga- the source of life and nourishment. There are innumerable legends associated with the descent of Ganga and symbolically it is often studied as an element that purifies human soul and provides man with his grace. But the incorporation of this water element in the Nataraja iconography fulfils the study of the image as an emblem of nature and enhances its worth as an ecologically faithful representation of Indian art.

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The third element is air or *vayu* which once again has two levels, its eternal atom and perishable *karya*. Air can be felt through our breath, through the storms and the breeze. But air, in its elementary form, is present around us eternally. While the Puranas mention more than forty types of winds or *marut*, seven are essentially important including: *Pravaha* ; *Avaha*; *Udvaha*; *Samvaha*; *Vivaha*; *Parvaha* and *Paravaha*. *Vayu*, unlike the other elements, does not have a concrete shape or form and cannot be touched, preserved or seen. It has to be felt and its presence is measured through the effect it has on other animate and inanimate things (e.g. it causes ripples and waves on water). In the Nataraja iconography it is represented astutely through the flowing hair of the Lord .The matted curls flowing from the Lord's head asserts the presence of air around him and its significance in the process of creation.

Fire or *agni* is the fourth element of the *Panchabhuta*. The essential character of fire is to generate heat. According to Hindu mythology, Agni is one of the eight guardians who guards our universe and is known as *Asta- dik-palakas* (Asta-eight, dik--Zone, Palaka-Guardian). Fire is positioned in the south east of the universe. Although in Indian mythology there is mention of various types of fires, the four important ones are fire of the earth, fire of the sky, fire of the stomach (hunger and digestive power) and the fire we commonly use. In the Nataraja iconography the upper left hand holds a tongue of flame in a half moon or *ardha chandra* gesture. This flame is often considered as the flame of destruction transforming Shiva into a destroyer. But Coomaraswamy opines “*Shiva is a destroyer and loves the burning ground. But what does He destroy? Not merely the heavens and earth at the close of a world cycle, but the fetters that bind each separate soul.*”<sup>11</sup> Mrihanini Sarabhai while

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11 Coomaraswamy (1985), pg. 61

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explaining as to why Shiva holds the hope of creation in one hand and the flame of destruction on the other, states “*Creation and destruction are the counterparts of His own Being. They are the two aspects of our life, for as we are born, so do we surely die.*”<sup>12</sup> Irrespective of its symbolic reading, the image of Nataraja signifies the importance of fire as an element represented through the flame that the Lord holds in one hand as also through the flaming arch that provides the image with an aesthetic frame within which the image stands.

The last of the *Panchabhutas* or the five elements is sound or ether. Ether is unique as it has only one character i.e. eternal. Ether is the bearer of sound (artificial or otherwise). One can hear it. The concept of *akashvani* or the divine sound which sages often claimed to hear is related to ether or *akasha*. That sound is judiciously represented in the Nataraja image through the *damaru*. The *damaru* which is held in the upper right hand, is an hourglass shaped drum that symbolises *Nada* or the first sound from where begins the story of evolution. While the drum having the shape of two triangles joined together symbolises the union of nature and energy that work together to eventually give birth to life, it also affirms the presence and significance of *akash* in its iconographic representation.

Only recently has there been a surge in writings related to literature, iconography and the representation of nature. The emergence of ecological studies and eco-criticism have caused a revival of interest in viewing literary and cultural works from the perspective of nature and understanding how iconography is relevant in physically representing environmental symbols. Partly the reason surrounding this revival of interest in the condition of nature in cultural works is

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12 Mrinalini V. Sarabhai, “Shiva-Nataraja” in *Symbolism in Hinduism*, compiled by Swami Nityanand (Mumbai: Central Chinmaya Mission Trust, 2008), pg. 138



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connected to the problems inherently caused due to the progression of an industrial society. Climate change summits involved in reducing emissions, waste and controlling industrial effluents are aimed at creating a better future for human beings to survive on Earth under the auspices of nature. One way of furthering the case of ecological improvement lies in the teaching of history from an ecological perspective and this procedure, in turn, demands reference to cultural symbols. Mythical constructs and iconographic representations of Shiva, serve this principle and enable human beings to be aware of how civilizations that were not technologically advanced came to co-exist with nature and live in harmony. Shiva in short, appears to me to be a material manifestation of cultural ideas that were previously relegated but deserve attention all the more in today's scenario. Man is no more at one with nature, but is moving further away from his goal of sustainable development. Nataraja thus, is not simply a unique representation of Shiva, but a national symbol that represents the rich past of Indian heritage and culture with its seamless amalgamation of nature and culture.