

The Giant Dance of Shiva

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A giant dance of Shiva tore the past;
There was a thunder as of worlds that fall;
Earth was o'errun with fire and the roar of Death
Clamouring to slay a world
his hunger had made;
There was a clangour of Destruction's wings:
The Titan's battle-cry was in my ears,
Alarm and rumour shook the armoured Night.¹

THESE LINES from Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri* at once bring forth the vision of Nataraja, the cosmic dance of Lord Shiva as depicted in the bronze statues in South India. These statues present themselves as spiritual texts that one may interpret them, or realise the underlying power and truth. It may therefore be attempted to read the statue of Nataraja or the cosmic dance of Shiva as poetry in sculpture. Perfect as it is in its symbolism and suggestiveness, it allows a deeper scrutiny of the nature in which poetry allows inquiry. Therefore, then the parameters applied to read spiritual poetry may also be read in the bronze statue.

It is not out of fancy that poetry and sculpture are being compared and the parameters of criticism imposed upon sculpture. This inquiry is based on Sri Aurobindo's comments and explanations of the nature of Indian Art and the highest kind of poetry. While detailing the nature of Indian sculpture Sri Aurobindo remarks: 'All great artistic work proceeds from an act of intuition, not really an intellectual idea or a splendid imagination,—these are only mental translations,—but a direct intuition of some truth of life or being, some significant form of

that truth, some development of it in the mind of man' (20.266).

In his treatise on poetry he writes: 'All poetry except that of the most outward kind ... is in its inmost inspiration and character intuitive, more a creation of the vision and feeling than of the intelligence ... The initiating inspiration must always be intuitive in a greater or lesser degree and it is the form or expression that differs' (26.288). In both the instances quoted above Sri Aurobindo emphasises that art and poetry have to spring from an intuitive level and also have to be judged by a similar intuition. This allows us to study sculpture and poetry with the same parameters. It may not be understood that this analysis has sprung from intuition; however, it is an attempt to take Sri Aurobindo's own description of the highest poetry and study how far it may be applicable to the statue of Nataraja. In this paper, a reference to Lord Shiva would only be as represented in the Nataraja statue.

There is another parameter that allows a comparison between poetry and the Nataraja statue and this is 'rhythm'. Swami Vivekananda in his poem 'The Dance of Shiva' says: 'Seven worlds play the rhythm; As the trembling earth sways almost to dissolution; Lo, the Great God Shiva is dancing.'² Sri Aurobindo too in his poem 'Shiva' writes: 'The rhythmic worlds describe that passion-dance.'³ Dance and poetry are invariably connected to rhythm. Therefore, the dance of Shiva could be studied in close connection to poetry.

The parameters of intuitive poetry described

by Sri Aurobindo in ‘The Future Poetry’ that may be applied to the Nataraja statue are ‘five eternal powers, Truth, Beauty, Delight, Life and the Spirit’ (26.222). He calls them ‘the five suns of poetry’ (ibid.). While Sri Aurobindo mentions of the ‘eternal powers’, it may also be read in relation to the five basic elements of which this universe is made—ether, air, fire, water, and earth. Heinrich Zimmer explains how these are connected to Nataraja:

The upper right hand [of Nataraja], it will be observed, carries a little drum, shaped like an hour-glass, for the beating of the rhythm. This connotes Sound, the vehicle of speech, the conveyer of revelation, tradition, incantation, magic, and divine truth. Furthermore, Sound is associated in India with Ether, the first of the five elements. Ether is the primary and most subtly pervasive manifestation of the divine Substance. Out of it unfold, in the evolution of the universe, all the other elements, Air, Fire, Water, and Earth.⁴

Sound is another principle upon which Sri Aurobindo lays great emphasis. In his commentary on the *Kena Upanishad*, he says: ‘Vibration of sound has the power to create—and to destroy—forms; this is a commonplace of modern Science.’⁵ He further adds: ‘The theory of creation by the Word which is the absolute expression of the Truth, and the theory of the material creation by sound-vibration in the ether correspond and are two logical poles of the same idea. They both belong to the same ancient Vedic system’ (18.32).

Here we get a deeper clue of the connection between Shiva, the lord of dance, the creator and poetry as creative word as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo and utilised by the Vedic Rishis of the yore. Therefore, the analysis of the dance of Shiva may be taken up from Spirit instead of Truth, for Spirit is the creator of all.

‘The poetic word is a vehicle of the spirit, the chosen medium of the soul’s self-expression’

(26.287). The Nataraja statue is a vision of the sculptor who saw the lord in his cosmic dance of creation. Therefore, it does not resemble any human figure but the sculptor’s ‘eye sees the psychic line and turn of things and he replaces by them the material contours’ (20.294). The dance of Shiva is not just perfect artistry, but represents the extent to which the sculptor has realised the working and the form of the Lord. He has carved him with utmost detail and cares not depicting a story but portraying the rhythm of the creation and its sustenance. It is his inward eye that has grasped this form and as Sri Aurobindo says, it is only an inner eye that can perceive the Spirit behind the statue.

If we juxtapose the five elements of poetry with that of five basic elements of creation we form a logical connection between Ether-Spirit, Air-Truth, Fire-Beauty, Water-Delight, and Earth-Life. Ether manifests Air; similarly, Spirit is expressed as truth. The widely-known truth of Lord Shiva or Nataraja is that of the creator and destroyer. Ananda K Coomaraswamy enlists five activities that the dance of Shiva represents creation, preservation, destruction, embodiment, and salvation.⁶ Zimmer gives a slightly different version of this—creation, maintenance, destruction, concealment, and favour.⁷ Shiva’s dance, *tandava*, is known for his act of destruction. Here we may refer again to the lines quoted from *Savitri* in the beginning of this paper: ‘A giant dance of Shiva tore the past.’ It is significant to note that Sri Aurobindo does not consider the act of Shiva as mere destruction, but the destruction of all that obstructs progress and evolution. All that is good and useful for the future is preserved, hence his image as preserver. He lays the foundation for a new creation. In *Savitri* too, Sri Aurobindo writes of the advent of the ‘sun-eyed children’, the new race which could come on earth only after the benevolent act of Shiva.⁸

Anand K. Coomaraswamy quotes a translation of *Chidambara Mummani Kovai*, which describes the features of Nataraja and says: ‘All these worlds are transformed by Thy hand bearing fire.’⁹ Therefore, Nataraja can also be seen as the Lord of transformation. In one of her conversations the Mother Mira Alfassa narrates how Shiva offered her the help to begin the work of transforming the body for which Sri Aurobindo began the work in 1926.¹⁰ This then is the truth of Lord Shiva if read from Sri Aurobindo’s perspective: that he is the Lord who creates—depicted through the symbol of drum—and transforms the earth by eliminating the evil and non-divine while facilitating the transformation of the physical nature itself.

In the sequence of creation next come fire and water that we have equated with beauty and delight. Beauty and delight are indispensable and are intertwined in the mind of the poet. ‘Delight is the soul of existence, beauty the intense impression, the concentrated form of delight; and these two fundamental things tend to be one for the mind of the artist and the poet.’¹¹ Such delight and beauty is evident in the Nataraja statue. Beauty is not only evident in the perfection of carving but the symbolism captured in the representation of fire. Delight is suggested in the grace of postures and the calm facial expressions of the Lord. Sri Aurobindo marvels at the representation of this delight and beauty: ‘What of the marvellous genius and skill in the treatment of the cosmic movement and delight of the dance of Shiva, the success with which the posture of every limb is made to bring out the rhythm of the significance, the rapturous intensity and abandon of the movement itself and yet the just restraint in the intensity of motion, the subtle variation of each element of the single theme in the seizing idea of these master sculptors?’ (20.292).

It may be required to dwell a little on the representation of ‘fire’ in the statue. Fire is assigned as the destructive *agni* in the hand of Shiva and the fire which forms his halo represents *tapas*. It is significant to note that Lord Shiva represents ‘power’ in the pantheon of gods. He is also known as the Lord of *tapas*, of intense ascesis. In the figure of the dance of Shiva, fire may represent that *tapas*, power and the fire in his hand may stand for the aspirations of the humankind that have reached him. This *agni*, may thus destroy the *tamas* and all that is dark in the human being and salvage one from one’s lower nature. This could be equated with the fire that transforms and not the fire that destroys. The dwarf demon that is trampled by the Lord is a clear sign of destroying ignorance and darkness. If we probe deeper into the statue, there is no reason to represent this aspect of destruction again and again in the same figure. It would perhaps be more appropriate to see fire as transforming and the feet destroying the unwanted.

Sri Aurobindo over and again emphasises the fact that all creation takes its birth in delight and tries to express this delight. The dance of Shiva too expresses the serene ecstasy of creation. A close look at the statue reveals that it represents both Shiva and Shakti, the ideative and the creative aspects of the Absolute. It would have been certainly an inspired moment when the statue was being carved. The sculptor could see the Lord representing the static and the dynamic, the ecstatic and the rapturous expressions of the divine. In fact many studies have made note of all the features that portray femininity in this statue thus representing both Shiva and Shakti in the same figure. It is indeed the delightful image of the Lord and his consort represented in perfect physical features that are in harmony.

‘The enlightening power of the poet’s creation is the vision of truth, its moving power is a

passion of beauty and delight, but its sustaining power and that which makes it great and vital is the breath of life' (26.242). It is true of the five elements also. Without the creation of earth the manifestation would not be complete. Without the breath of life, poetry or art would not be complete. The Nataraja statue is an example of this complete manifestation on earth of the element of life. It is significant that the dance takes place here in the world and not in the solitudes of heaven. One of the interpretations of the symbols of the circle of fire around the figure of Shiva is that the Lord is creating through his rhythmic dance while being a part of it and not from some other pedestal. He is as much a part of our universe as we are. He has not left us alone. He is here on the earth, in the life plane amidst us constantly destroying the asura, the non-divine within us.


Interestingly the studies by Zimmer and Swami Kritarthananda¹² speak of the significance of the creative word *Aum* in connection with the halo and the drum. We have already discussed the connection of sound and creation. This creative word is *Aum*, the 'mystical utterance ... stemming from the sacred language of Vedic praise and incantation'¹³ and 'is the source of the ceaseless sound going on in the cosmos called *nada-brahman*.'¹⁴ We may note here that *Aum* is also known as *pranava*, the basic sound that created this manifestation. This *pranava* is the main element of what we call *prana* that sustains life in this creation. So we see a continuum from the Spirit to Life in manifestation represented by the Dance of Shiva.

Interestingly, Swami Kritarthananda also brings to our notice the link between our life, the physical phenomenon of which is explained by science and spirituality that represent the aspect of higher and inner life in science and spirituality:

Scientists have observed a marked similarity between this dynamic movement of particles in the subatomic universe and the macrocosmic dance of *Nataraja*, the king of dancers. This observation leads to the subsequent conclusion that Swami Vivekananda found in the depth of his meditation: 'The microcosm and the macrocosm are built on the same plan.' The *Kathopanishad* also corroborates this concept of identity between the microcosm and the macrocosm in saying, 'What indeed is here, is there; what is there, is here likewise' (ibid.).

The statue of Nataraja, thus, represents life in all its scope and beautifully suggests the link of all the five elements of nature and facilitates us to study the elements of poetry envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. What Sri Aurobindo wrote for the studies of scriptures may well be applied to the text in sculpture and we may conclude in his words:

Only those Scriptures, religions, philosophies which can be thus constantly renewed, relived, their stuff of permanent truth constantly reshaped and developed in the inner thought and spiritual experience of a developing humanity, continue to be of living importance to mankind. The rest remain as monuments of the past, but have no actual force or vital impulse for the future.¹⁵

The statue of Nataraja has been offering itself for renewed experiences and interpretations ever since it was carved. This constant renewal is the key to its sustenance at the same time; it also proves that the statue of Nataraja is a scripture of philosophy having deeper meaning for which it is approached time and again. 

References

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3. *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, 2.609.
4. Heinrich Zimmer, *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, ed. Joseph Campbell (New York: Pantheon, 1946), 152.
5. *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, 18.30.
6. See Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays* (New York: Sunwise Turn, 1918), 59.
7. See *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, 154.
8. *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, 33–4.343.
9. *The Dance of Śiva: Fourteen Indian Essays*, 60.
10. See *Mother's Agenda*, 13 vols (Paris: Institut de Recherches Évolutives, 1978), 2.197.
11. *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, 26.254.
12. See Swami Kritarthananda, 'The Eternal Dance of Shiva', *Prabuddha Bharata*, 120/2 (February 2015), 230–6.
13. *Myths and Symbols in Indian Art and Civilization*, 154.
14. 'The Eternal Dance of Shiva', 232.
15. *Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo*, 19.5.

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