

The Thillai Nataraja Temple - A Symbol of Artistic Expression and Cultural Diversity

**Dr. S. Indira¹, Dr. S. Thanigaivelan², Dr. K. Vengadachalam³,
Priyanka Chakraborty⁴, Peelam Lakki Yaadav⁵, G. Kiran⁶**

¹Principal Investigator, ICSSR Program, Department of Philosophy, Pondicherry University

²Co- Investigator, ICSSR Program, Department of Philosophy, Annamalai University

³Co-Investigator, ICSSR Program, Department of Philosophy, Madras Christian College

⁴Research Assistant, ICSSR Program, Department of Philosophy, Pondicherry University

⁵Field Investigator, ICSSR Program, Department of Philosophy, Pondicherry University

⁶Research Associate, ICSSR Program, Department of Philosophy, Annamalai University

Abstract

India, the land of diversified cultures comprehends different beliefs, traditions, languages, and customs defining one's identity within a society. Despite the cultural diversity, the spirituality within the country unifies people towards a common cause of divinity following similar rituals and activities. This country is also known as the birthplace of Hinduism, an ancient religious practice, whose translation and conservation are well imitated among the ancient temples of South India. In this aspect, these temples have a huge influence on the cultural diversity within the nation. Among many, the Thillai Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, a constituent of the "Panchabhoota Sthala" signifying the element 'ether', is one of India's most respected and culturally significant temples, and has shaped both the region's spiritual and artistic traditions. Considering this fact, this article enlightens the impact of the Nataraja Temple on the cultural diversity of India explaining its importance to people's spiritual seeking and intellectual awakening. The formation of the temple and the abode of Lord Nataraja alongside Goddess Kali have been depicted through the legendary tales of the temple. Apart from the divine aspects, the temple centres intellectual curiosity, fabricating artistic expressions, and shaping cultural beliefs. The causality of the temple's art and ethnicity aids the diversification of art, philosophy, and customs, therefore the cultural diversity.

Keywords: Art, Culture, Coomaraswamy, Bharata Muni, Nataraja

Introduction

India is known to house several ancient temples with their history and essences. Some of them serve as pilgrimage sites where many devotees gather despite their cultural diversity, towards a common cause of spirituality. South Indian temples are some of the most splendid and glorious structures in India, standing as eternal symbols of art, history, culture, and spirituality. From the towering gopurams (gateway towers) to the intricately carved pillars and expansive Mandapas (courtyards) the architecture of South Indian temples showcases an extraordinary blend of artistic excellence, religious devotion, and cultural diversity.

About the Temple

Thillai Nataraja Temple is one of the five sacred Shiva temples in South India, which are associated with one of the five elements of nature – Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Ether. This temple is devoted to Lord Nataraja (the dancing Shiva), which represents the element of Ether (Akasha). Lord Shiva is represented here as the Lord of Cosmic dance, depicting universal power and the rhythmic life cycle (i.e., the cycle of birth and death). One of the unique features of this temple is worshipping Shiva in the form of an Anthropomorphic Idol (Murthi) rather than a Lingam. The presiding deity of the temple is Thirumoolanathas (Lord Shiva in the form of an idol), and the Goddess of the temple is Umayambika (Goddess Parvati). The Thillai Nataraja Temple's architecture is a classic example of the Dravidian temple style, which is distinguished by its towering gopurams (gateway towers) and beautifully carved sculptures depicting many holy and mythological stories.



Figure 1: North Gopuram of Nataraja Temple

The name “Thillai” is derived from the term “Thillaivanam” which means mangrove of Thillai trees (*Excoecaria Agallocha*). These particular trees were found in the surrounding area of the temple place and nearby places of Pichavaram water lands. Later on, the rulers of the Chola Dynasty renamed this place Chidambaram. The word Chidambaram is derived from the term “Chithambalam” which means “wisdom atmosphere”. The Nataraja form of Shiva was worshiped by the Cholas with great devotion considering Lord Siva as their family Deity (Kula Devata).

Coomaraswamy’s view on the Nataraja Statue and its spiritual significance

Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) was a well-known art historian, philosopher, and cultural theorist who made valuable contributions to the study of traditional Indian art. His work mainly focused on the importance of understanding art in its cultural and spiritual framework through philosophy and symbolism. He claimed that art should be viewed as an artistic pursuit and as an expression of religious and intellectual truth.

In one of his famous works, “The Dance of Shiva”, he delineated the Nataraja figure as a comprehensive representation symbolizing the cosmic rhythm. The dance is signifying the creation, protection, and extinction of the cosmos. Each movement in his dance conveys one of the five activities (Pancakritya) of the universe, namely Srishti (creation); Sthiti (preservation); Samhara (destruction); Tirobhava (concealment); and Anugraha (blessing). Shiva as portrayed in the Nataraja pose signifies the stability of

cosmic forces with his left leg firmly planted on the ground and right leg raised. The hand with the damaru (drum) symbolizes creation, the hand with agni (fire) indicates destruction, the hand of hope is for protection, the fourth hand pointing towards raised foot implies soul's refuge, the raised foot symbolizes liberation from the cycle of birth and death, the other foot represents the stability and preservation of the universe, and the closed arch of flames signifies the cycle of life.

The figure of Nataraja conveys the concept of divine wholeness through the form, signifying the relationship between the material and the spiritual. The symbolic representation of Nataraja's depiction provides individuals from diverse cultures a scope to visualize life with a unique perspective, resulting in intellectual expertise with the potential to elevate the soul of cultural beliefs, not only through ritual practices but also through cognitive understanding. Thus, the Nataraja expresses the connection of all beings by transforming art as a bridge between the material and the heavenly.



Figure 2: Replica of Nataraja Idol from Nataraja temple

Chidambaram as a centre of the evolution of Indian art and culture

The Thillai Nataraja Temple, at Chidambaram, is a religious centre that influenced the formation of Indian classical art forms, philosophy, and culture. The Chidambaram temple is considered the centre of the cosmic dance form which is embarked upon by several devotees in the form of dance practice. According to a legend, a dance competition between Shiva and Kali showcasing their supremacy resulted in the temple's establishment. Before the formation of the Nataraja temple, there was a temple of the goddess Kali surrounded by the jungle of Thillai trees. Once two saints, Patanjali and Vyaghravada, desired to watch Shiva's Ananda Tandava in the Thillai forest and performed ascetic practices (tapas). Overwhelmed by their sincere tapas, Shiva appeared to dance but was challenged by Kali. Shiva and Kali danced before Patanjali, Vyaghravada, and Vishnu, and their dance techniques matched equally, making it difficult to decide a winner. On Vishnu's advice, Shiva lifted his right leg towards the sky (urdhvatandava) and goddess Kali restrained from performing this step due to feminine shame, resulting in her defeat. Then she moved to the periphery of Thillai forest and gave the temple to Shiva (Thillai Nataraja Temple). After her

defeat, Kali took the ritual bath at the Sivapriya tank outside the temple's premises, later where the Thillai Kali Temple was established.

Commenting on the dance of the Chidambaram temple, it's worth mentioning Bharata Muni, a well-known character in the history of Indian arts, particularly classical dance and theatre. Natya Shastra, a revolutionary book written by him on dramatic arts, published between 200 BCE and 200 CE, describes the components of dance, theatre, music, and aesthetics, serving as a broad foundation for performing arts. A legendary tale revolves around the concept of the origin of the dance, where on Indra's request Brahma produced the fifth Veda, "The Natya Veda, or Drama Veda". Bearing the responsibility of producing the first play, Bharata Muni presented it before Shiva on Mount Kailasa, who was impressed, and upon the humble request for the knowledge of dance, He proffered His attendant, Tandu, to instruct Bharata Muni with the Karanas (dance movements) and the Angaharas (collective dance poses). Post the completion of Tandu's instruction to Bharata Muni, his son and the apsaras (angels) offered the 'art of dance' to humanity. Henceforth, Bharata Muni mentioned in his Natya Shastra that all the Indian dance forms are enrooted to Shiva's Tandava.



Figure 3: Shiva and kali Dance Competition

The most important aspect of Indian classical dance, as defined in Natya Shastra, is the idea of the 108 Karanas. As believed, the dance of Shiva at the Chidambaram is the manifestation of the 108 Karanas, reflecting the various gestures supporting the chief facets of Hindu worship – rituals, meditation and transformation. The four gopurams in the temple corridors are decorated with the inclusive portrayal of all 108 Karanas where each sculpture depicts aspects of human life. The 108 Karanas were adopted in the form of a temple dance ritual called Dasiyattam performed by Devadasis (Servants of God).



Figure 4: Sculptures of dance forms on the East Gopuram

This dance form, although evolved over the years into a superior and organized style with its effect on Indian art and culture as a whole, its spiritual core linked to religious devotion still intact. This ancient dance form was later recognized as Bharatanatyam. The significant evolution of Bharatanatyam was seen during the British colonial period due to the disbanding of the Devadasi system and the negative awareness of temple-based practices. In the early 20th century, various visionaries and artists re-established it as a traditional dance form that was recognized as both an art and religious expression. After independence, Bharatanatyam was further refined, becoming a prominent art form in India and also across the world. The Bharatanatyam has had a profound and prolonged impact on Indian art and culture, where it has been adopted by different regions infusing their cultural ethnicity resulting in a diversified form of the dance, for example, the Thanjavur form, Melattur form, Pandanallur form, Vazhuvoor form, etc. All these different dance styles of Bharatanatyam are focused on varying expressive storytelling and utilize various gestures (known as mudras), facial emotions (the bhavas), and several postures. These dance styles are well shaped due to their vibrant and significant cultural force, thus interconnecting ritual and innovation. The Chidambaram Nataraja Temple hosts several celebrations throughout the year. Among all, the Nattyanjali Festival is well-known and honours the Lord Nataraja, the cosmic dancer. Commencing from the night of Shivaratri, it is celebrated for 5 long days. It is focused on the Indian classical dance and lord Shiva's spiritual dance (Ananda Tandava), thereby assigning it one of the most important cultural and spiritual events. Several classical dancers and young talents from India and throughout the world gather and dance with devotion and spiritual expression. The people of Chidambaram culturally embraced the spiritual dance form of Shiva (Nataraja) and every year during the Shivaratri they open the temple providing a stage to all the devotees to presenting their sincere devotion towards Lord Nataraja. During the festival, renowned classical dancers and artists get together to perform various Indian traditional dance forms such as Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kuchipudi, Odissi, and Manipuri. This festival recognizes the temple's connection to the "Jatadhari" whose Ananda Tandava represents the rhythm of the cosmos, and where the dancers connect themselves with Shiva's cosmic dance by presenting their performances as acts of devotion.



Figure 5: Girl Performing Bharatanatyam in Nataraja Temple

Conclusion

The Thillai Nataraja Temple in Chidambaram, India's oldest and most prestigious Shiva temple, alongside being a place of devotion is a prosperous centre of cultural diversity. The significance of the temple is due to Lord Nataraja (the cosmic dancer), believed to have danced on the temple premises. Thereby, it has a great effect on classical dance (mainly the Bharatanatyam), Carnatic music, sculpture, and literature. Since time immemorial, the temple has served as a global university where philosophers, scholars and artists across the world visit for enlightenment with the temple's marvels despite their diversified culture. Thus, the Thillai Nataraja Temple is an important symbol of India's cultural unity with diversity in its artistic performances and intellectual collaborations, where ancient knowledge meets modern study.

References

1. Chithralekha, K. (2017). A RHYTHMIC JOURNEY THROUGH TIME AND SPACE"- A STUDY OF ANCIENT SOUTH INDIAN DANCE AND TEMPLE ARCHITECTURE. *Proceeding of the 4th International Conference on Arts and Humanities*, 4, 54-66.
2. Coomaraswamy, A. K. (1957). *THE DANCE OF SHIVA*. New York: The Noonday Press.
3. Coomaraswamy, R. P. (2004). *The Essential Ananda Coomaraswamy*.
4. IIZUKA, M. (2017). Relationships among the Hindu Gods. *Regional Policy Research*, 20(2), 95-114.
5. Liesbeth Pankaja Bennink, A. K. (2013). Shiva's Karanas in the temples of Tamil Nadu: the Natya Shastra in stone. <http://asianart.com/articles/karanas>.
6. Meduri, A. (2005). *Rukmini Devi Arundale - A Visionary Architect of Indian Culture and the Performing Arts*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishing House.
7. V. Gobinath, N. E. (2023). KARANAS AT THE CHIDAMBARAM NATARAJA TEMPLE. *Pranav Journal of Fine Arts*, 2(1), 255-260.
8. Vijayalakshmi, R. (2001). *An Introduction to Religion and Philosophy - Tevaram and tivviyappirapantam*. Interanational Institute of Tamil Studies.