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# RAAVAN TOL – NEW FINDINGS OF THE ROCK-CUT NATARAJA OF UDAYPUR, MADHYA PRADESH

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**Abstract:** The deity Siva is portrayed in a variety of divine roles, but Siva as Nataraja or “lord of the dance” was the one that rose to prominence as a representation of Chola power from circa eight to tenth centuries CE, especially bronze icons. However, the antiquity of the Nataraja images can be traced back to the sixth century CE. These images were usually represented in metal or stone in many Saivite temples, particularly in South India. In Madhya Pradesh, stone Nataraja are found from ninth century CE onwards. This paper focuses upon the massive sculpture of Raavan Tol, a eleventh century CE stone Nataraja, found upon a hill, in the village of Udaypur, district Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh

**Keywords:** Madhya Pradesh, Monolith, Paramara, Siva, stone Nataraja, Udyaditya, Udaypur.

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## Introduction

The Nataraja icon is a unified and energetic arrangement expressing the flow and euphoria of life. It depicts Siva, a Hindu deity, as the divine cosmic dancer. The name of his dance is *tandava* (Verma 2011: 19-26). In most Saivite shrines, especially those in South India, it is typically depicted in metal or stone.

Siva was portrayed in a variety of divine roles, but Siva Nataraja was the one that rose to prominence as a representation of Chola power (c. 8<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> century CE). Nataraja was the state and family deity of the Cholas. According to scholar Padma Kaimal (Kaimal 1999), the tale and depiction of Siva Nataraja may also be related to the Chola military dances. The Cholas may have viewed the cosmic dance of Nataraja as

an additional support for their association with Siva, who through the battle in the Chidambaram Forest displayed his supreme divine authority as military prowess was one of the basic foundations of Chola supremacy.

One of the earliest known Nataraja images hails from the village of Asanapat, Odisha, and dates to around the sixth century CE (Chattopadhyay et al, 2003). During that period there were numerous cave temples in India that contained stone reliefs depicting Nataraja in his classical guise, including the Ellora Caves and the Elephanta Caves in Maharashtra, and the Badami Caves in Karnataka (Harle 1994, Verma 2012). According to literary evidence, the first representation of Siva in *Anandantandava*, appeared in the Pallava period, during sixth to ninth century CE (Singh: 2008:642) when Nataraja was worshipped at Chidambaram during their rule (Srinivasan 2004). Around the tenth century CE, Nataraja images emerged in Tamil Nadu in its most mature and famous form in Chola bronzes. The earliest three-dimensional stone Nataraja statues have been discovered in temples constructed by the Chola queen Sembiyan Mahadevi. One such statue is in the Kailasanathaswami Temple, that dates to the mid-tenth century CE (Singh: 2008: 642).

### Nataraja Statues in Central India

In Madhya Pradesh, a red sandstone Nataraja figure from Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh, dating to the ninth-tenth centuries CE, has been found and is now on display at the Gwalior Archaeological Museum (Harle: 1994:156). Another sculpture dating from the tenth century CE was discovered in Udaypur (Vidisha). Siva is carved in a *Chaitya* arch (*Gavaksha*) in a beautiful dancing pose. This is a part of the *Sukanasika* of the temple (Fig. 6.1). It is currently placed at Gujri Mahal Museum, Gwalior (Gujri Mahal Museum, 2022). Another dancing Nataraja figure appears in the *shikhara* of the Neelkantheshwar temple (Fig. 6.2), which is dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

### Raavan Tol: The Monolithic Dancing Nataraja

Raavan Tol is a huge sculpture of Nataraja, located in the village of Udaypur, of Vidisha district in Madhya Pradesh (Fig.6.3). The sculpture is locally called Ravan Tol, but it is a massive form of dancing Siva, Nataraja. It was first mentioned in the “Annual Report of the Archaeological Department of Gwalior State,” of the year 1923-24, and again in 1952 by D.R. Patil (Patil 1952: 140). These reports did not provide any images of this monolithic sculpture. Using an airborne camera, a photograph of the image was taken for the first time in the year 2022 and the entire image of the Raavan Tol Nataraja was revealed.

The dimensions of the sculpture are 8.2 metres in length, 4.2 metres in width, and 1.75 metres in thickness. The thickness varies at different points along the length of the sculpture. This figure lies on its back, and judging from the chisel marks on it, it was never completed (Ansari 2012). As mentioned earlier, it is a long sculpture of Siva in his dancing form, the Nataraja form. The dwarf upon whom Nataraja dances is the demon *apasmara purusha* (or *muyalaka*, as he is known in Tamil), and symbolizes the demonic evil and ignorance over which the sacred dance of Siva gains victory. Siva’s legs are bent, suggesting an energetic dance. This Nataraja idol has six hands. The three right hands hold *khadga* (sword), *Damaru* (small double-headed drum) and the third an unfinished object, probably a *trisula* (trident). One of the hands on the left side hold a *parasu* (axe), another points a finger towards the left foot in a dancing *mudra* and one is in *Abhay Mudra*. At *Raavan Tol* this feature of a six-handed deity stands out, as the common number of hands in a Nataraja statue is either four or eight. The upper right hand holds the *Damru*, from which creation issues forth. The right hand, the one in *Abhay mudra*, is raised in blessing, betokening preservation. A serpent is hanging down with its coils, and its hood on the chest is entwined around the neck. The head of the figure is covered with matted hair shaped like a crown (*jatamukuta*)





Fig. 6.1: Nataraja (c.10th century CE), Udaypur, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh



Fig. 6.2: Nataraja carved on the *Shikara* of Neelkantheshwar temple, Udaypur





Fig. 6.3: *Raavan Tol* - Nataraja Sculpture, Udaypur, Vidisha, Madhya Pradesh

with the sign of crescent moon on it (Gwalior State. 1923-24).

The likely weight of the above-listed dimensions of the Nataraja is likely to be between 101 to 110 metric tons. The raw sand stone material for the sculpture was brought from elsewhere and then carved and worked on at the site. It is unclear how this enormous monolithic figure reached the hilltop and how this huge piece was cut from another place and transported to the site. It is significant to mention that it is not fixed to the ground, merely placed upon it.

This sculpture has an inscription along the length of the figure. The inscription in *Devnagari*

is believed to be in some local dialect and has not been deciphered so far (Fig. 6.4). This is being reported for the first time.

This monolithic stone Nataraja sculpture is believed to be the largest among similar images of the early mediaeval period in India. The construction of this Nataraja sculpture is believed to be during the period of the Paramara King Udayaditya who ruled from c. 1070–1093 CE (Ansari 2012) who planned to build another temple similar to the present Neelkantheshwar temple (INTACH BHOPAL, 2022: p 156-158). This places the date of this Nataraja image in the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.

Near this sculpture are the remnants of the bases of pillars in round sandstone. It is likely these were to be used for the grand temple proposed at this site during the Paramara period, but for some unknown reason the temple complex could not be completed. This temple, if built, would have been the first Nataraja temple in Madhya Pradesh.

We have found three Nataraja sculptures associated with Udaypur in Vidisha district. Seeing all three sculptures holistically, one can find several differences among them. The sculpture in the Museum at Gwalior and the Nataraja embedded in the Neelkantheshwar Mahadev temple are part of the *sukanasika*.

The sculptures of Nataraja have differences in their *nritya mudra*. The *Raavan Tol* has its left leg lifted, but the Nataraja at Gwalior has its right leg lifted, and the one on the *shikhara* in Neelkantheshwar Temple has its left leg lifted. The Nataraja at Gwalior and Neelkantheshwar Temple has eight hands. But, *Raavan Tol* has six hands.

It is also likely that the dissociated piece might belong to some other temple in Udaypur village whose remains may have been collected during the antiquities survey by the Department of Archaeology and transferred to the Gwalior Museum. It is also probable that the Paramara king was a devotee of Nataraja and wanted to erect a massive image of the deity upon the hilltop. However, the sculpture was too heavy to





Fig.6.4: Inscription carved on the statue

be made to stand erect and was left lying in its present state.

The circular design around the Natarajas that were part of *sukanasika* is similar, indicating that these were made by similar workshops at Udaypur. The overall style of the two sculptures looks similar, apart from being in red sandstone. The huge monolithic Nataraja is much different in style and concept and must have been meant to be the presiding deity of the Nataraja temple to be built at this site.

From being an ornamental feature on the *sukanasika* of temples to the well-developed iconographic style of *Raavan Tol*, the concept of worshipping Nataraja was spreading in Central India. It is worthwhile to mention that during that time several large stone sculptures of different deities were built by different dynasties in different parts of the country. The Visnu Sesha-Sayana sculpture of Bandhavgarh and the Bhairom Baba statue of Rewa are examples of massive stone sculptures. However, nowhere in the country in mediaeval times has a similar sculpture of Nataraja been attempted by any dynasty.

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