

A new Interpretation of the Natarāja Concept.

“WHATEVER the origins of Śiva's dance,” says Dr. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, the eminent authority on Indian Art, “it became in time the clearest image of the *activity* of God which any art or religion can boast of.”¹ This view has since been endorsed both by Indian and Western writers on the subject. Even Havelock Ellis concedes the fact that the ecstatic Hindu dance connected with Śaiva cult is “a great symbol” of mystical religion.² The fact that it is in South Indian Śaivism that the worship of Śiva-Rudra is most marked and it is in the Śaiva bronzes of the South that the Natarāja symbolism has found its permanent home has led to the general belief that the origin of the concept of a dancing Śiva must be sought for in some non-Aryan culture.³ While it is admitted that in the final form of the symbolism there may be some Aryan elements, still the original basis of the cult is traced to some “pre-Aryan hill-god, afterwards merged in Śiva.”⁴ Of the Rgvedic Aryan culture reference is made only to the concept of Rudra as an accountable *motif* in this mythic symbolism. Rudra, according to Havell, “was gradually absorbed into the philosophic synthesis of the Śaiva cult and is represented in Indian art by the Bhairava, or terrible aspect of Śiva.”⁵ But that this attitude ignores a good deal of the relevant evidence from the Rgveda and thereby fails to do justice to the true historical method of studying the evolution of the Natarāja concept becomes increasingly clear to the careful investigator. In the ensuing discussion the present writer hopes to marshal sufficient facts from the Rgveda to demonstrate that the ultimate origin of the conception of a dancing Śiva or Natarāja is amply illustrated by Rgvedic data, and specially that the origin of the idea of divine Dancer must be looked for *not* in the character of Rudra, however closely he may appear to be related to the later figure of Śiva, but elsewhere. Although the point has been overlooked by previous writers, misled no doubt by the otherwise undeniable similarity between the two characters, the palpable fact remains that Rudra in the Rgveda is never even once regarded, or even suggested, as a ‘dancer,’ while references to other dancing gods are not uncommon.

The earliest evidence, however, for the existence of dancing in India—whether popular or ritualistic is not made clear—is not regarded as that afforded by the Rgveda but by the discoveries of the Indus Valley.⁶ This idea is based

on the general opinion as to the relative priority of the Indus Valley civilization to Rgvedic culture, a point however, that cannot be conceded on the present show of evidence put forward even by the most ardent protagonist. In any case, the fact is indisputable that dancing as an art along with the rudiments of music belongs to the earliest known period of India culture. It is often forgotten that the culture reflected in the Rgveda is a complex one—a fusion of many archaic trends of civilization with very primitive barbarian cultures which latter constitute the oldest strata of the Rgvedic cults and beliefs. Further, it has been constantly ignored that most of the evidence of the Rgveda relates to cultural forms not existent in the contemporaneous Aryan society but to earlier and more primitive states of culture that had passed off by the time the hymns were composed but came to be recorded in these documents by way of ‘survivals.’ It may be seen, therefore, that the whole problem of the evolution of cultures in India awaits fresh investigation in the light of the latest available information from the anthropologist and the prehistorian, and, accordingly it will be nothing short of an inveterate pedantry that can adhere dogmatically to some inadequate hypothesis or an outworn theory.

In the late Saṃhitās and the Brāhmanas there is clear evidence of the fact that dancing of all sorts had developed considerably by the time they were composed, not only in the ritual but in the daily life of the people as well. At the Mahāvratā rite and at the horse-sacrifice maidens danced round the fire carrying water pitchers in their hands⁸ and, similarly, during the marriage ceremony four or eight women were employed to dance in the house of the bride.⁹ The popularity of this form of art in the period under discussion can be seen from the fact that some texts complain with a characteristic sense of moral puritanism that it is the bad taste of women which prefers the dance and song to the recitation of the Veda.¹⁰ These references no doubt indicate a long prior development of the art of dancing, and, although the point has been ignored by previous writers on the subject, it is to the Rgveda that we must turn for the evidence of its primitive stage. The scholastic bias that regards the Rgveda only as a religious text containing nothing but prayers and invocations to so many gods, combined with the notorious indifference of the average Vedic scholar, particularly the western savant, to matters aesthetic, has doubtless been the cause of this neglect. But no true history of any art in India can be successfully undertaken in the absence of the whole mass of data afforded by this remarkable Aryan document. In fact, it may be added

1. *The Dance of Śiva*, p. 56. Cp. *Mirror of Gestures*, pp. 8 ff.
 2. *The Dance of Life*, p. 38.
 3. But see Slater, *The Dravidian Element in Indian Culture*, pp. 106 ff.
 4. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Śiva*, p. 56.
 5. *The Himalayas in Indian Art*, p. 58.
 6. E. Mackay, *The Indus Civilization*, pp. 93 ff. Sir John Marshall, *Mohenjodaro and the Indus Civilization*, pp. 38 ff.

7. See the present writer's paper on “Rgvedic River-Goddesses and an Indus Valley Seal” in *Dr. C. Kunhan Raja Presentation Volume*, p. 428.
 8. Keith, *Religion and Philosophy of the Veda*, p. 351; Dubash, *Hindu Art in its Social Setting*, p. 186.
 9. Keith, *Op. cit.*, p. 374.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 475.

that the evidence of the R̥gveda is of inestimable value not only to the student of the evolution of Indian dancing but—and this is perhaps even of greater importance—also to the general investigator of the prehistory of this earliest of arts.

It is significant, then, that already in the R̥gvedic period dancing was a well-known form of art however crude and primitive its technique may appear to the critic of modern times. It should not be surprising if most of the references to dancing in the R̥gveda have a mythical and ritual colouring and it is only rarely that the secular forms of the art are hinted at, for the text of the hymns as we have them is the work of priestly circles. But the already developed use of the metaphorical application of the verb *ṛt*, to dance, certainly indicates a long prior cultivation of the art. Thus Indra is said to make his bolt dance (*nartayan*) on behalf of the sacrificer (1.51.3). Similarly, the pressing-stones employed in the preparation of the Soma-juice are said to *dance* (*anartīsur*) embracing the sisters, *i.e.*, the fingers (10.94.4, 14), and it is of technical significance that the 'revolutions' of the stones are clearly referred to (*ib.* 8). Further, dancing of a company in close embrace (*cp.* 10.72.6) is also hinted at, as well as dancing in the open air (*ibid.*; 5.52.12). The origin of the lyrical dance is seen when the poet says that the Goddess of Dawn "like a female dancer (*nṛtū iva*) puts her broided garments on" (1.92.4). Poetic fancy is seen at its best in the description of morning as the time when "this dawn and the next come dancing hither" (10.29.2), a metaphor which finds an exact parallel in Milton's "now the bright morning-star, day's harbinger, comes dancing from the east." The Vedic fancy here no doubt reflects the primitive mythological tendency to conceive the rising of celestial luminaries as a "dancing hither," which as has been pointed out,¹¹ has an analogue in the dance of the Sun on Easter Day in German, Slav and Celtic myth. Further evidence as to the popularity of dancing in the R̥gvedic period becomes unnecessary when it is found that dancing and laughter (*nṛtaye hasāya*) are cited by one poet as such ordinary characteristics of life as help to differentiate the nature of the living from that of the dead (10.18.3).

It is to be remembered that almost all of the above allusions to dancing in the R̥gveda refer to the secular or the social aspect of the art, in particular to the lyrical dance of young maidens. But the more copious, and, at least from the point of view of the present subject, undoubtedly the more important, references to the art are certainly those indicating the survival from still more primitive times of the more natural and vigorous type of dancing as attributed to the male gods Indra, the Maruts and the Aśvins. Of these too the dance of Indra, the war-god *par excellence*, must be held to take the pride of place.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 121.

Thus Indra, as the fighter of the foes of the Aryans or of the godless barbarians whom the Aryans confronted in India, is in three hymns addressed as "O Dancer" (1.130.7; 2.22.4; 8.24.9, 12), and is expressly referred to as "*the Dancer*" in three other hymns: "The immortal Dancer dances forth his heroic exploits" (5.33.6); "who as his praise was sung of yore, the Dancer, is the Lord of men" (8.57.7); "Indra, the Dancer, be to us the giver of abundant strength" (8.81.3). It is highly significant that this epithet of 'Dancer' (*nṛtuh*) is generally applied to the impetuous war-god of the nomadic Aryans in contexts that clearly stress his physical vigour (*śavas*), energy (*vāja*) and manly might (*nṛmna*), a fact that unmistakably points back to a very primitive origin of the idea in the savages' war dance¹² and thus brings him into close relation with Rudra. In view of these authentic references to Indra's character as the divine Dancer in the R̥gveda, it seems idle to reject the suggestion of Max Müller¹³ that the verse 10.124.9 of the R̥gveda contains an allusion to "Indra dancing to an *anustubh*" (*anustubham annu carcūryanānam indram*), a context which is not without a suggestion as to how the original war dance may have evolved into the ritual dance, as we shall see later. The late Vedic tradition too has preserved this trait of Indra's character as may be seen from the Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa which alludes to Indra as an aged dancer (iii.244), but the main *motif* of 'the divine Dancer' originally constituting an aspect of the Indra myth has in course of time been transferred to the synthetic character of Śiva-Rudra resulting in the celebrated Natarāja symbolism. Such transference of the constituent part of one myth to another is a far too well-known principle of mythology to need stressing here.

This hypothesis of transference is not a mere logical postulate but one that can be amply justified by further evidence from the R̥gveda itself. It is to be noted that along with Indra the *only* other gods regarded as 'dancers' are the Maruts and the Aśvins. The Maruts are addressed as 'Ye Dancers, breast-adorned with gold' (8.20.22) and are said in another place in the R̥gveda "to have danced towards the spring, keeping steps to measure,¹⁴ wildly shouting and singing" (5.52.12). Similarly the Aśvins are invoked in no less clear phraseology: "amid the race of gods, ye dancing heroes" (6.63.5), and the basis for this identity of appellation lies in the simple, yet insufficiently known, fact that according to the R̥gveda the Aśvins are only the 'best' or 'chief' of the Maruts themselves, for that is the only legitimate sense possible for their description as "maruttama" (1.182.2); they are also "marutvantaḥ" or "having the Maruts in their company" (8.35.13). Now, it is of immense import that this latter epithet is usually applied to both Indra (1.100.1, 101.8; 3.51.7 etc.) and Rudra (1.114.11; 2.33.6 etc.), the former being

12. *Cp.* Griffith, *Hymns of the R̥gveda*, Vol. 1, p. 496.

13. *Vedic Hymns*, Part I (S.B.E. Vol. XXXII), p. xcvi.

14. *Ibid.*

prominently celebrated in the Ṛgveda as the fighter-hero who leads the Marut host into battle against the foes of the Aryans, and the latter being regarded as no other than the father of the Marut host who thus come to be styled themselves as 'Rudras' or 'Rudriyas.' These facts no doubt present enough occasion for the transference of an epithet of Indra, relating, as his primitive war dance is, to the battle dance of the savages,¹⁵ to Rudra, the Wild Huntsman, who is so closely similar to him by way of the Maruts as demonstrated just above. Moreover, it is in these very facts that we must seek for the ground of the *leadership* of the gods ascribed to Indra and the source of the epithet 'Mahādeva' as a synonym of Natarāja, which practically implies the same thing, a fact supported by the Ṛgvedic qualification of Indra himself with the parallel "mahān" many more times than any other single god.¹⁶ Furthermore, the similarity of the conception of Indra as Dancer to that of Natarāja in point of the application of the epithet 'Śiva,' which too is used for Indra in the Ṛgveda (8.52 = 63.4; Cp. 8.4.15, 18) just as for Rudra (10.92.9), cannot be ignored for that is the most important *name* of the latter divinity in South India.

Finally, the most important characteristic of Śiva's dance, as emphasized by Dr. Coomaraswamy, is its creative and cosmic aspect. But even this greatest of *motifs* in the Natarāja symbolism is not without an antecedent in the mythical dance of Indra as recorded in the Ṛgveda. That the verse 10.124.9 contains a hint as to the evolution of the ritual dance in Ṛgvedic religion has already been indicated. When it is said that "the sages by their (mystical) contemplation observed Indra dancing to an Anuṣṭubh" (anuṣṭubham annu carcūryamāṇam indram ni cikyaṇ kavayaṇ maṇṣā) it is difficult to escape the conviction that here we have the conception of an ecstatic realization of the mystical symbol of a dancing Indra. For, the Ṛgvedic term 'maṇṣā' means 'spiritual reflection' (1.61.2) or 'devout contemplation' (5.83.10) or even 'divine grace' (1.186.1; 10.29.3) as pointed out by Grassmann,¹⁶ and the verb *ci*, perceive, with the suggestive prefix *ni*, downwards, into, must imply a 'seeking downwards' or a 'probing into (*i.e.* the heart)' by sages (*i.e.* mystics) in devout contemplation of Deity (cp. 10.114.9). Such a practice of mystical religion is also referred to in other contexts in the Ṛgveda: "Searching the heart (hrd) deeply by contemplation (maṇṣā) the sages (kavayaṇ) found there the bond of existence in the non-existent" (10.129.4). In fact, it is highly significant that the Ṛgveda pictures the creator gods, like Yatis (10.72.7), Sādhyas and Ṛṣis (10.90.7), at the time of the world's creation "kicking up in dancing the atoms which

formed the earth:"¹⁷ "When ye, O Gods, in yonder deep close-clasping one another stood, Thence, as of dancers, from your feet a thickening cloud of dust arose" (10.72.6)¹⁸. In view of these facts, it is difficult to agree with Keith who says: "dancing as a means of producing ecstasy is never mentioned though the gods as dancers may be a relic of the conception."¹⁹ Nor does his reserve seem wholly justified in disdaining the suggestion of Arbman that the account of the mad Muni in the Ṛgveda (10.136) may be a reference to Rudra as the god of an orgiastic cult, whose epithet 'vyuptakeṣa' in the Yajurveda (TS. iv. 5.5) also hints at his being the lord of an orgiastic dance.²⁰ That even Indra has preserved the traits of a vegetation deity has been demonstrated,²¹ and, as it was remarked at the beginning of this discussion, the culture of the Ṛgveda is a complex one representing the result of the crossing of several primitive and primary cultures. Thus, in conclusion, it may be noted that the above presentation of facts leaves no room for any doubt as to the possibility of the celebrated mystico-aesthetic symbolism of Natarāja being a historical development from the Ṛgvedic conception of a *dancing Indra*.

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17. Wallis, *Cosmology of the Ṛgveda*, p. 43.

18. Griffith, *op. cit.*, II, p. 486.

19. *Op. cit.*, p. 402.

20. *Ibid.*, 150.

21. J. J. Meyer, *Trilogie altindischer Mächte*... reviewed by Benoy Kumar Sarkar, *IHQ*. Vol. XIX. No. 4, pp. 373 ff.

15. See R. R. Schmidt, *Dawn of the Human Mind*, pp. 119, 172; Dorothy Davison, *Men of the Dawn*, p. 115; cp. Curt Sachs, *World History of the Dance*, Ch. 1.

16. See Grassmann, *Wörterbuch zum Rig-veda*, s. v.