

NATESHA: THE MANIFESTER

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ABSTRACT

The cave temple at Mandapeshwar is a part of the Pashupata (Shaiva) group of caves in Mumbai. Scholarly evidence suggests that the caves witnessed Buddhist and Brahminical activity when they were functional. Although small and unique in character, the caves must have had a particular usage attributed to them. The Natesha or the dancing Shiva sculptural panel is speculated as an important manifest form of Shiva. This paper aims to explore the manifest form of Shiva through the dancing Shiva sculptural panel and explore the importance of this cave temple within the Mumbai region. The methodology used is the arbitrary method which involves analytical research through scholarly writing supported by inductive reasoning.

Keywords: Manifestation, Guru, Devotee, Form, Association, Significance

INTRODUCTION

॥ आगिकम् भुवनम् यस्य
वाचिकं सर्व वाङ्मयम्
आहार्यं चन्द्र ताराधि
तं नमः सात्त्विकं शिवम् ॥

*We bow down to the purest form of the Universe (whole)
Lord Shiva - adorned with the moon and the stars,
Who is represented through His bodily movements and speech
(as a part).*

The Dhyaan Shlok

Shiva is perceived as the God of Destruction (*samhara*). His believers imbue Him with other vital roles as well: that of creation (*srishti*), preservation (*sthiti*), grace (*anugraha*) and obscuration (*tirobhava*). He is also a great yogi, teacher, and dancer (Sethi, 2021). Lakulisha, the 24th incarnation of Shiva, is believed to be the founder of the Pashupata sect, the preacher and the most outstanding teacher (*guru*) in Pashupata Shaivism. The emphasis of this study is to study the Natesha (dancing Shiva) sculptural panel at Mandapeshwar cave temple. Considering Mandapeshwar's proximity to the Buddhist monasteries at Kanheri and Magathane, one can infer that Mandapeshwar located in Borivali-West in the Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) was one of the main Pashupata centres in the bygone times (see Figure 1) (Pandit, 2020). Scholars also assume that the cave temple was used by both Buddhist and Hindu monks and ascetics. The excavations of the Elephanta and the Mandapeshwar caves were undertaken only after the excavations at Jogeshwari [1], in the second half of the sixth century CE (Pandit & Narayanan, 2013).

This paper aims to explore the manifest form of Lord Shiva through the Natesha (dancing Shiva) sculptural panel at Mandapeshwar cave temple. Further, the paper looks at the eminence of the cave temple in the Mumbai region. The objective of this paper is to traverse the anthropomorphic aspect of Shiva through the following questions : Can this form of Shiva be considered the 'guru'? Is this sculptural form of crucial importance in the cave temple? Can we assume that this form must



Figure 1: Mumbai Metropolitan Region map showing Buddhist and Brahminical caves along Western Express Highway
(Source: Adapted from (Salvi, n.d.))

have been used to draw power from those who used the cave? Although smaller in size, why is this cave temple given so much importance? The methodology used is to explore the tangible and intangible facets associated with the manifest form of Shiva and the Mandapeshwar cave temple. These aspects would be supported by inductive reasoning to arrive at a hypothesis for the questions posed and draw a conclusion.

Literature Review

Dr Suraj Pandit's books – *Mumbai Beyond Bombay* (2020) and *Stories in Stone* (2013) have been used to deduce facts and assumptions for this paper. Pandit claims that the spaces within this cave temple, which served as sanctuaries for Buddhist and Hindu monks and ascetics, may have been used for social and cultural activities. The Mandapeshwar cave temple being near the Western Express Highway (which originally functioned as a trade route connecting the north and the north-east regions then) and the neighbouring Buddhist caves, Pandit speculates that the cave temple could have been used as a religious centre by both Buddhist and Hindu monks and ascetics as meditation and living spaces. This helps in looking at the cave temple as an important site. Although Pandit's writing suggests that the Natesha form is the pedagogue of all devotees, his interpretation indicates that the form seems to be paramount and essentially powerful.

Further, Wendy O'Flaherty Doniger's chapter "The Myths Depicted at Elephanta" from the book, *Elephanta: The Cave of Shiva* (1983) has aided in drawing parallels for the sculptural panel. The myths she interpreted in the article are specifically for the Elephanta cave sculptures. A myth associated with the dancing Shiva sculptural panel at Elephanta can apply to the dancing Shiva sculptural panel at Mandapeshwar. Both the panels are claimed to be similar in nature by many scholars. Through this paper, the myth regards Shiva's dance as a manifestation of the act of cosmic re-creation.

Natesha, the Dancing Shiva

Shiva is considered the Lord and teacher of all arts and is thus called Natesha (Pandit & Narayanan, 2013). On close observation of the dancing Shiva panel at Mandapeshwar, it is apparent that it can be fruitfully compared with the dancing Shiva panel at Elephanta (see Figures 2 & 3).

Similarities can be observed in the posture of Natesha and the surrounding figures in these panels at the two caves. Unlike other Brahmanical caves, the dancing Shiva and the Lakulisha panels are the only two iconic forms of Shiva within Mandapeshwar because the cave temple was left incomplete (see Figure 4).

Both the forms advocate that a guru must initiate the devotee to reach a certain level in his practice, as described by Suraj Pandit in his talk at Sarmaya Arts Foundation (2018). According to this, Lakulisha and Natesha represent the Spiritual *Guru* and the Teacher of all Devotees, respectively. There is no physical evidence of a *guru-shishya* relationship seen within the cave temple. This interpretation can be supported only by speculation. Though their function is primarily didactic illustration, the panels also serve a secondary purpose as devotional icons (Michell, 1983).

The dancing Shiva panel at Mandapeshwar shows Shiva in a dancing posture flanked by celestial figures and His attendants. The composition is symmetrical because Shiva takes centre stage and is carved larger than the

other divine figures. Stylistically and architecturally, the crowded composition portrays the figures' gestures and postures, creating a mythical scene representing a cosmic drama within the proscenium (Michell, 1983). In the panel, the lower portion of Natesha, along with His hands and facial features, are somewhat damaged (see Figure 2 & 5).

Natesha is depicted with eight arms (four arms on each side) and a *jatamukuta* [ii] as hair-dress. Three female figurines are carved at the lower left side of Natesha, the central one being Parvati, while the remaining two are assumed to be her attendants. A small figure playing a pair of drums, presumably a male attendant, is observed near the right side of Natesha. A male figure identified as *Bhringi* [iii] is near Natesha's right foot. On His central right side, we see Ganesha with a *gana* [iv] while Vishnu with Garuda [v] and Brahma are located on the upper corners of the panel along with *gandharvas* [vi]. Shiva's form (imagining Him with the arms intact) encompasses the diagonal or oblique diameters, which are essentially kinetic and symbolises movement and the embodiment of the time factor in the composition (Poddar, 2021).

In the complete form of Figure 6, the upper and lower parts were more likely inclined towards the vertical, and the form of Shiva could be in a transition from the calm (*shanta*) towards the violent (*raudra*). One can further associate this movement with an ancient myth narrating the world's re-creation. Although the form can be imagined as a *tribhanga* [vii] (see the



Figure 2: Dancing Shiva panel at Mandapeshwar (Source: <https://architecturez.net/pst/az-cf-191315-1554021116>)

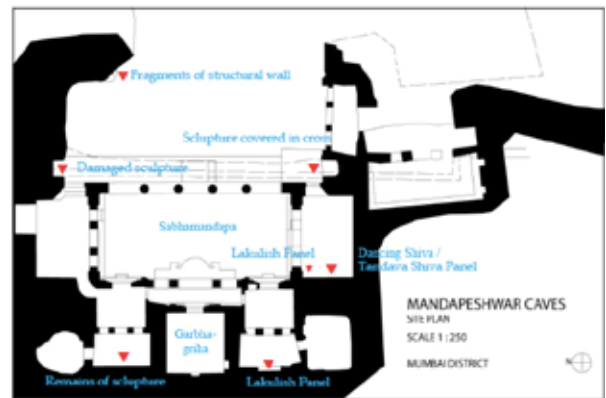


Figure 4: Figures from the Dancing Shiva panel at Mandapeshwar (Source: College S., 2016, p.654)

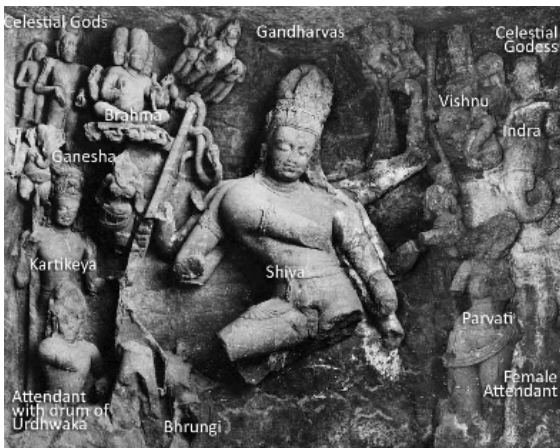


Figure 3: Dancing Shiva panel at Elephanta caves (Source: College S., 2016, p.528)



Figure 5: Locating the Dancing Shiva and Lakulisha panels at Mandapeshwar (Source: College S., 2016, p.658)

line marked in blue in Fig. 6), the panel remains a mystery to the observer due to damage. Since the facial expressions of all the figures, the hand gestures and leg positions, mainly of Natesha, the *bhava*, *mudras*, and the variations in the standing position (*sthanasana*) associated with them are not discernible due to damage, the panel cannot be adequately examined for accurate interpretations. However, suppose it is considered that the panel is similar to the one at Elephanta. In that case, some fruitful deductions can be made: the facial expression of Natesha suggests that He is expressing the *shanta bhava* (tranquillity) (see Figure 7). In contrast, the other figures seem to be in awe (*vismaya bhava*) of Natesha (see Figure 2 & 3), acknowledging Him as the Supreme Authority of the cosmos.

Mythical Associations

Two myths can be associated with Shiva that is pertinent to this essay. One is related to the dancing Shiva panel, while the other is connected to the Mandapeshwar cave temple. Shiva's dance takes two forms: *lasya*, the gentle erotic dance correlated with the creation of the world, and *tandava*, the violent, dangerous dance related to the destruction of the world (Doniger, 1983). Although this myth's North and South Indian variants are significantly different (Doniger, 1983), the North Indian variant is relevant to this essay. As per the legend, Shiva tried to demonstrate to the sages residing in a forest that they had not yet overcome their lust and anger by posing as a handsome naked beggar with an erect phallus, dancing with and exciting the sages' wives (Doniger, 1983). This

angered the sages, and as an act of retribution, they castrated Him and cursed the universe into darkness. When the sages realised who He was, they begged for forgiveness and for the universe to be restored from the darkness. They were forgiven on the condition that they worship His phallus (*linga*). This myth regards Shiva's erotic dance as an act of cosmic re-creation (Doniger, 1983). Here Natesha is seen as the manifestation of the cosmic dance in an eternal life-death rhythm. Hence, we can deduce that the dancing Shiva panel at Mandapeshwar seems like a mythical scene representing a cosmic drama within the proscenium, as rightly put by George Michell for a similar panel at Elephanta caves.

From the various Indian festivals, *Tripuri Pournima* [viii] is celebrated with great pomp at the Mandapeshwar cave temple each year. This celebration began on an uncertain date. As per a popular legend, the demon *Tripurasura* had received immense powers from his penance to please Brahma and even created three cities in space. He became arrogant and dictated his supremacy over the three worlds, causing a nuisance. Because of this, the gods appealed to Shiva, asking Him for relief from the demon's actions. Shiva fought with the demon with His divine powers, destroyed all his cities with a single arrow, and finally vanquished Tripurasura on *Kartik* [ix] *Pournima* (Gajendragadkar, 2013). The gods were overjoyed with the slaying of the demon, and hence the day is celebrated as *Deva-Diwali* [x]. In my opinion, the festival could be a symbolic celebration of victory over the demon and the restoration of the cosmic balance.

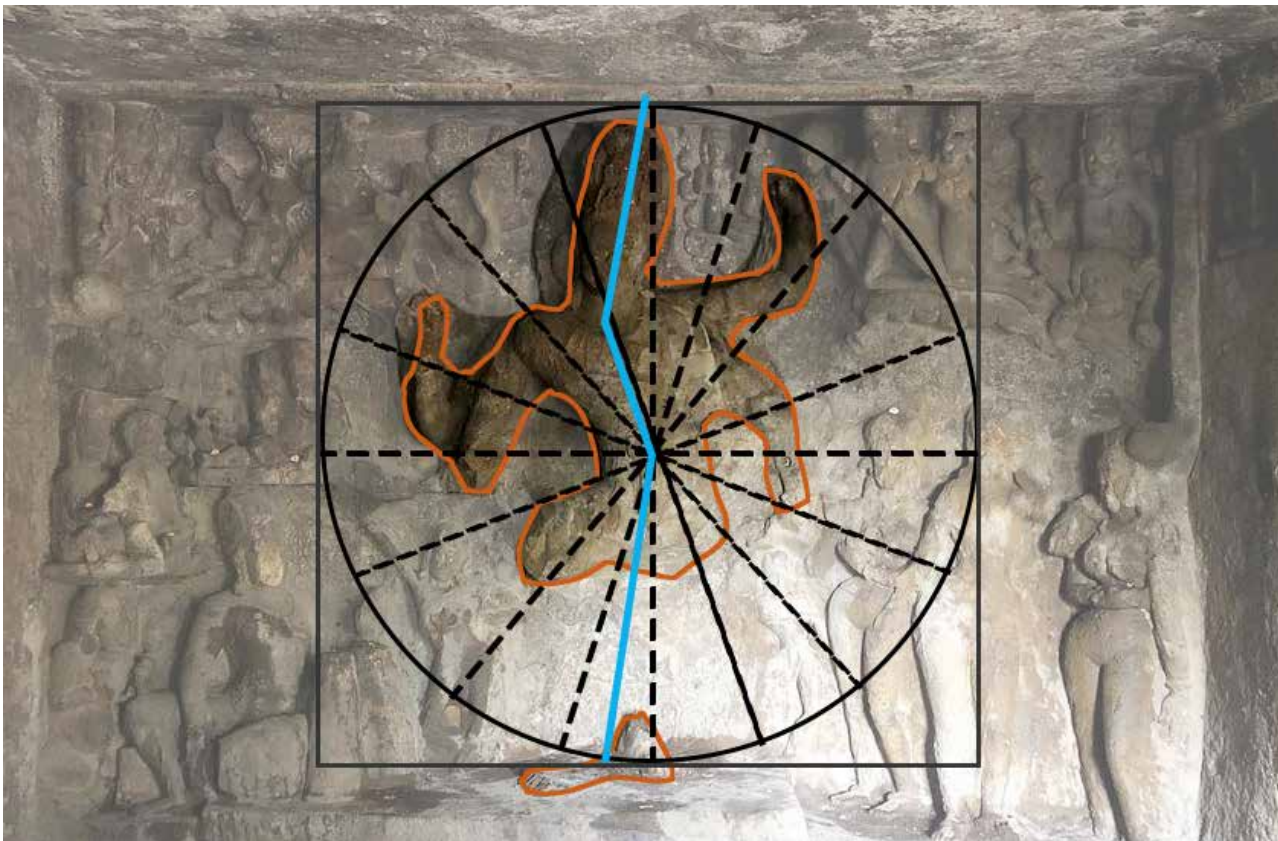


Figure 6: Dancing Shiva sculptural panel showcasing the 'tribhanga' pose with probable geometry of the position
(Source: <https://architexturez.net/pst/az-cf-191315-1554021116>)



A.



B.

Figure 7: Comparing the facial features from the Dancing Shiva panels at Elephanta (A) and Mandapeshwar (B)
(A. Source: *Documentation of Caves by MMR*, pg. 528, B. Source: <https://architexturez.net/pst/az-cf-191315-1554021116>)

This could be one of the reasons why the dancing Shiva panel is of prime importance. Since the panel is easily accessible at Mandapeshwar, the celebrations today take place with great opulence and fervour.

Conclusion

From scholarly evidence and the myths, one can concur that undeniably Natesha is one of the essential manifestations of Shiva. Relating the first myth with the form, the form is essentially kinetic and symbolises movement and the embodiment of the epoch in the composition; one can possibly assume the form to be dynamic and energetic. The movement and the embodiment of the time factor can be revered as depicting the restoration of the cosmic balance making the dancing Shiva panel at Mandapeshwar of prime importance. It would still be questionable whether this form can be viewed as the iconic guru since no myths or scholarly evidence directly points to it. Although Pandit's writing implies that the Natesha form is the teacher of all devotees, one cannot explicitly label the form as assuming the role of the 'guru'. Pandit's interpretation indicates that the form must have been paramount and essentially powerful to allure all kinds of devotees. Still, it would remain a question whether devotees used the form within the cave temple as a source or guru from which to draw power and inspiration.

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Endnotes

- [i] Jogeshwari caves- These are the earliest known Pashupata Shaiva caves in Mumbai.
- [ii] *Jatamukut* – A crown made of hair (*jata* – hair, *mukut* – crown). Scholarly evidence says that the jatamukut is one of the iconographic representations of an ascetic.
- [iii] *Bhringi* - A great devotee of Shiva and an ancient sage.
- [iv] *Gana* – Attendant of Shiva.
- [v] *Garuda* - Vehicle of Vishnu.
- [vi] *Gandharvas* – Performing artists (musicians) to the Gods.
- [vii] *Tribhanga* – A standing body posture in Indian classical dance or traditional Indian art where the body bends in three directions – at the knee, at the hips and at the shoulder and neck.
- [viii] *Pournima* – Full moon night.
- [ix] *Kartik* – One of the months from the Hindu calendar.
- [x] *Dev-Diwali* – Diwali of Gods.