

## **The Cult of Nandi in Tamil Nadu With Special Reference to Rajarajeswara Temple, Thanjavur**

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### **Abstract**

*All forms of nature are worshipped in India from time immemorial including plants and animals. Nandi worship manifests from the Bull worship. When humans shifted from being the food gatherers to food producers, the Bulls played a crucial role. From the Neolithic period onwards, cattle assumed significance in the social and economic spheres. An iconographic form was created for Bull in the form of Nandi, who was made as the vahana of Shiva. He is shown seated in front of Lord Shiva with utmost dedication and concentration. Though a lot of work has been done on the iconographic forms of various deities, not much work has been attempted on the iconography of Nandi. This article traces the cult of Nandi as shown in Rajarajeswaram temple, Thanjavur built by the Chola King Rajaraja I in 1010 CE. Two Nandi sculptures belonging to the Chola and the Nayak period have been studied. It also highlights the legend of Nandi and the iconographic representation of Nandi.*

**Keywords:** Nandi, Rajarajeswaram temple, Nayak, Cholas, Nandanar, Shiva's vahana, Pradosha.

### **Introduction**

The concept of nature worship in India can be traced to the ages of the Neolithic, Harappan, and Vedic periods. Humans not only looked at nature from a utilitarian perspective but also a sacred point of view. In the animal kingdom, certain animals are respected and valued more than others, because of their perceived characteristics, attributes, appearance, and utility. There is a strong symbolism behind such attributes which can be approached from eco-critical perspectives. The cow is one such valuable animal and in human-environmental relationships, the cow was perceived with respect in Indian tradition. The divine animals can be seen in the Indian iconographic forms from a very early

period. Almost all the gods and goddesses are provided with vehicles and associates in animal forms.

One such important vehicle or vahana, for Siva, is Nandi, the bull. The bull is considered a sacred as well as powerful animal in India from a very early period. The depiction of bulls in Harappan seals and the coins of historical periods is noteworthy. Apart from the utilitarian value, the aesthetic characteristics and symbolic values of nature are in cultural spheres. The Shankha (conch), Garuda, and bull and personification of rivers formed an essential component of nature worship and symbolism. No wonder that the Harappans gave such prominence to bulls in their iconographic system as reflected in the seals. Similarly, the iconographic features of Asokan pillars suggest the use of animal symbolism.

The powerful bulls were tamed, used, and were also worshipped. The bulls assume significance in religious traditions too. Nandi or bull is given the place of prominence initially as the door-keeper of Siva's abode and as the leader of sivaganas. Later he became the proud vahana of Lord Siva. Though there are sporadic publications on Nandi, there is no comprehensive work on Nandi in medieval Tamil Nadu.

### **Previous Work**

The earliest sculptural representation can be found in the temples built by the Pandyas in the southern part and by the Pallavas in the northern part of Tamil Nadu. One of the earliest representations can be seen on the vimana of the monolithic temple at Kalugumalai, Tirunelveli where Siva and his consort Uma are shown flanked by two Nandis (Randhawa and Randhawa, 1985).

The Cholas perfected the architecture and art of their predecessors and erected colossal temples for the Hindu deities all across their territories. Many scholars have worked on the art and architecture of the Siva temples built in the Pallava, Pandya, and Chola periods. These scholars have contributed immensely to the study of art and architecture. Apart from this, various studies on important Siva temples in Tamil Nadu have been conducted (Dubreuil, 1915, 1926; Banerjea, 1956; Nagaswamy, 1970, 1983; Gopinatha Rao, 1971; Balasubramanian, 1966, 1971, 1975, 1979; Gupte, 1972; Soundararajan, 1981; Kramarisich, 1981; Maity, 1982; Rathnasabhpathy, 1982; Subramanian, 1985; Rajendran, 1988; Waghorne, 1991).

However, there are only a handful of exclusive publications on the studies of Nandi (Dhaky, 1972; Rathnasabhpathy, 1982; Rajarajan,

1996; Akila, 2015). The Silpa texts such as Manasara (Acharya, 1979) give a detailed description of the iconographic representation of Nandi. Dhaky (1972) analyzed the Nandi images from the regions of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, Rathnasabhpathy (1982) while describing the bronze images at Thanjavur art gallery, elaborates on the Adikaranandi form. Rajarajan (1996) discussed the Vrishabavahana form of Shiva in which Lord Siva is portrayed leaning on Nandi in literary and artistic traditions. Akila (2015) highlighted the importance of Nandi as Pradoshanayakan wherein she traced the puranic story of Nandi. Here the focus is on the colossal Nandi at Brihadeswara temple, Thanjavur.

The legendary and textual evidence has been studied by scholars albeit on a minor scale. The legend of Nandanar was popularized by Gopalakrishna Bharati (1899) in which the Nandi at Thirupungur moved aside to allow Nandanar, one of the 63 Saivite saints and a lower caste person to have a clear darshan of Lord Siva. Nandi has been a part of Hindu rituals. The legend of Nandi's marriage at Tirumazhappadi with Swayambikai is very popular and till today the marriage ceremony is celebrated with pomp and gaiety. After the marriage, Nandi and his wife are taken in procession around the saptavidangasthalas namely Thiruvaiyaru, Thirupazhanam, Thiruchotruthurai, Thiruvadhikudi, Thirukkandiyur, Thirupoonthuruthi, and Thiruneithanam (allocated near Thanjavur). The popularity of Pradosha time during which Lord Siva is said to be dancing atop Nandi between the horns is also noteworthy. The religious texts of the medieval period namely Devaram provide a lot of reference to Nandi (Narasimhan, 2006). The Devaram texts refer to Nandi as 'vitai, erutu, itapam'.

### **The Cult of Nandi**

There are religious texts that describe the story of Nandi. He was elevated to the position of guru to eight important disciples who were instrumental in spreading Saivism across the world.

Nandi, according to Siva Maha Purana, was born as the son of Salankayana, a rishi who did penance under a Sala tree and asked for a son. Vishnu gave the boon and a son sprang from the right side of Vishnu, who looked like Lord Siva. He was named Nandi, one who gives joy and happiness. In Tretayuga, a rishi known as Nandi did penance in the Mandara mountain. He asked for two boons, namely steadfast devotion to Lord Siva and appointment as the head of the ganas. Linga Purana narrates that a boy emerged from a yajna (Vedic sacrifice) as a son for the blind rishi Silada, who was doing penance for the birth of a son without human bondage. He appeared like Siva with

jatamakuda, three eyes, and four arms carrying Sula, tanka, Gada, and vajra (Gopinatha Rao, 1971).

In the spatial scheme of Iconography, Nandi should be placed before the shrine of Siva in erect or recumbent form either within the temple or on a raised pedestal in an outer mandapa. The Manasara text gives vividly the various measurements for sculpting the image of Nandi (Acharya, 1979; Manasara, LXII). Nandi is usually depicted with virility, strong physique, legs, tail, and dewlap. In the early period, the ornamentation of Nandi is not elaborate. In the later period, Nandi is adorned with garland, a string of bells attached to the neck, saddle cloth, and leg ornaments too (Dhaky, 1972; Kramarisch, 1981).

The literature too highlights the importance of Nandi. The Saivite hymns called Devaram sung by the Saiva devotees in the medieval period in Tamil give information about Nandi.

The Nandi can be iconographically depicted in five forms (Rathansabhapathy, 1982) namely

- a) Brahmanandi, of stone is placed near the side of the main deity at the Sanctum
- b) Vishnunandi, of metal, is placed in mahamandapa
- c) Mahanandi, of stone, is placed outside the main shrine
- d) Adhikari Nandi, a form that looks exactly like Lord Siva with attributes such as mriga (deer) and parasu (axe). But Adhikara Nandi is shown in Anjali hasta while carrying a rod on his shoulder. He is portrayed at the Gopura between Vishnu Nandi and Mahanandi.
- e) Nandiaavartanam, is placed beneath the main Linga in the sanctum as eight nandis. It is very rare to see with the exception being at Kapilswara temple, Mylapore, and Siva temple at Tirumullaivasal. He is shown in Anjali hasta with rudraksha placed between the hands.

The Sivagama Nibandhana of 11th century CE describes that the Nandi should be shown with flawless limbs and he should be adorned with many jewels (Dhaky, 1972). The Nandi will have the following adornments.

Forehead with manirekha (jewel band)

Thigh with Chamara (fly whisk)

Neck with bell or garland of bells

### **Rajarajeswara temple, Thanjavur**

Vijayalaya established the Chola kingdom in Thanjavur in the 9th

century CE and his successors not only consolidated their power by political conquest but also left an indelible mark in the cultural landscape of the Kaveri region. The temple building activities started by the Pallavas in northern Tamil Nadu and the Pandyas in southern Tamil land were developed by the Cholas who built innumerable temples across the breadth and width of the Tamil region.

The Chola architecture reached its zenith during the rule of King Rajaraja I (985-1014 CE), who built a magnificent temple which he called Rajarajeswaram in the capital city of Thanjavur in 1010 CE (Fig. 1). The temple popularly called Brihadeswara temple is known for its tallest vimana and a huge Sivalinga. The temple has many additions and modifications in the later period. The Amman shrine was added by the Pandyas, the Subramanya shrine by the Nayaks, and the Ganesha temple by the Marathas.

The temple has two main gateways-gopuras built during the Chola period. On entering the temple, a huge Nandi mandapa is seen that houses a huge Nandi. However, the Nandi mandapa and the Nandi were built during the time of the Nayaks. According to some scholars the original Nandi built during the Chola time due to its smaller size is kept in the prakara mandapa near Varahi temple (Balasubramaniyan, 1995). As the Linga is huge, the later Nayak rulers could have replaced the smaller Chola period Nandi with a bigger one as Brihadeswara (Lord Shiva who is magnificent) deserves a huge Nandi.



Fig 1. The temple Vimana \*

### **The Chola Nandi**

The Nandi placed in a small enclosure in the prakara mandapa near the Varahi temple has characteristic features of Chola Nandi (Fig.2). Here Nandi is shown in couchant position and his head is adorned with a headband. His front legs are folded backward while the hind legs are bent frontwards. His head is raised with his tongue sticking out. He is

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adorned with neck ornaments. He has a gphantamala- a garland of bells around his neck and one around his body. He also has a neckband. He has a band that goes in the middle of his body. His dewlap is not very prominent. The horn and ears are not shown prominently.

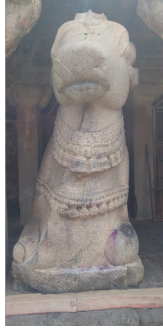


Fig 2. Chola Nandi?

He is shown with a hump that is shown prominently running across his body like a thick fold. This feature is unique which is not seen in the later period. This feature is noticed in pre-Rajaraja Nandi sculptures with hump shown around the body with folds (Fig 3 and 4). This can be dated to the Chola period stylistically based on similar Nandi forms found at Puspavaneavara temple, Tiruppunturutti (Near Thanjavur), Sadyayar Kovil, and Isvara Kovil, Pudur (Dhaky, 1972).



Fig.3 and 4. Profile of Chola Nandi

### **The Nandi of Nayak period**

The Nandi mandapa is the later addition to the temple complex. Built by the Nayaks, the mandapa can be reached by a flight of steps. It has a huge Nandi image, made of a single stone. It is 12 feet high with a width of 8 feet. The Nandi mandapa is painted beautifully. The mandapa has portrait sculptures of Sevappa Nayak and his son Achchuyuta Nayak.





Fig. 5. Nandi in Nandi mandapa (Nayak Period)

Nandi is decorated with manireka on his forehead, and he is adorned with a garland of bells around his neck and body. Apart from this, three layers of neckbands adorn the Nandi. He is shown seated in a couchant position with the head held high. His eyes and ears are prominently portrayed. He has a saddle cloth over which a band runs. He has a very prominent hump but the folds of the hump as seen in Chola Nandi are not visible. His dewlap merges with his frontal portions. His tongue is shown outside. His horns are sharp and huge.

Stylistically there is a variation in the form of Nandi from that of the Chola period. Adornment is becoming more prominent. The hump is portrayed boldly. The horns and ears are shown very clearly. The majestic nature of the bull is significant in the portrayal.

On the day of Maatu Pongal in mid-January (Pongal festival celebrated exclusively for cattle), the Nandi is adorned with one thousand kilos of fruits and vegetables (Fig.6). Pradosha day every month is celebrated with abhisheka for Nandi in a grand manner.



Fig 6. Nandi adorned with vegetables and fruits  
(After Malaimalar dated January 17, 2019)

Nandi as a vahana has significance in many aspects. Spiritually it is believed that Nandi is in deep meditation and his unwavering steadfast devotion is shown in the way he is portrayed in front of Lord Shiva. The devotees on seeing the Nandi image before entering the temple are inspired by Nandi's devotion to God, and they are encouraged to emulate his example.

In the natural world, Nandi is associated with agricultural practices. Though food production started in the time of the Neolithic period, in the consequent periods including the modern-day, the importance of agriculture is well attested. The Cholas having their center of power in the fertile Kaveri plain are known for meticulous land management, which is known by the inscriptions attesting to the production of agricultural goods. The personification of fertility is shown as Nandi. Probably that is the reason why fruits and vegetables are offered as adornment to Nandi as a thanksgiving for his contribution to the agricultural prosperity of a region. Both from spiritual and materialistic points of view, Nandi assumes significance.

### Conclusion

This research paper tries to throw light on the hitherto unfocused iconographic form of an important vahana of one of the trinities in the Hindu pantheon. There are many interesting stories and legends associated with various forms of Nandi. In the same temple complex, the images of Nandi belonging to two different cultural periods are differently portrayed. A detailed study of Nandi images of the Chola period and Nayak period is needed to understand the nuances of the sculptural variations.

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