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**OUTER PLACES, INNER SPACES**

## Constructing the gaze in Chola Chidambaram

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The Chidambaram Nataraja temple, as it is known today, is a famous place of worship dedicated to the cult of dancing Shiva, called Nataraja, located in the town of Chidambaram in the Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu in South India. Scholars have long debated over its peculiar architectural design that departs in a significant way from the prescriptive architectural canons of South Indian temple architecture. Our understanding of the Nataraja temple is complicated not only by the numerous architectural changes that have taken place over the centuries but also by the lack of sufficient historical data, which would have detailed the size, function and organization of the temple from its inception. Numerous books and scholarly articles written on this subject generally categorize the temple's architectural history into the Pallava, Chola, Pandya and Vijayanagara periods. My chapter does not attempt to give any systematic study of the temple's various architectural features that had developed over time. Nor does it intend to offer any answers to the basic questions about art historical issues such as iconographic and stylistic types of the temple's designs. The purpose of my chapter is rather to track ideological and political changes and cultural developments of thought and practice in the material record of art and architecture. Building my argument on the 'communication thesis' advanced by R. Champakalakshmi (2011:456) that "architectural and artistic motifs convey social, political, and ideological messages", I intend to show that throughout its long and complex history, the rulers skilfully used religious art and architecture of the Nataraja Chidambaram Temple to not only consolidate their respective political clout in the region but also to persuade the populace of their individual dynastic interests and interpretations. Leaving aside other periods and rulers who wrested power from the temple and initiated its architectural remodelling, my chapter will focus distinctively on the architectural changes introduced during the Chola reign.

## Outer places, inner spaces

In its present form, the Nataraja temple consists of a unique group of 5 halls (*sabhas*), 5 enclosing walls or circumambulatory temple courtyards (*prakaras*), 4 gateway towers (*gopurams*) and Shivaganga tank arranged within a vast rectangular precinct of nearly 15 hectares. The first-time visitor to the site is immediately confronted with its royal grandeur, awesome in majesty and magnitude, reflecting the everlasting influence and legacy of the Chola kings. Indeed, the major part of the temple complex, as it stands today, was erected during the reign of the subsequent Chola rulers: Vikrama Chola and Kulottunga II as part of their extensive rebuilding project that was meant to ensure the position of Chidambaram as the most important ritual and political centre in the 12th-century Tamil Nadu (Hall 2001). Once a visitor reaches the innermost centre of the temple hosting the image of dancing Shiva, the overall character and ambience changes significantly to reveal the sacred core, noticeably smaller in size, that embodies the chaste simplicity of form and economy of organization. Thus, in its overall spatial setting, the architectural layout of the temple can be defined by the two polarizing areas: the outer and the inner. The former, in all its grandeur, speaks of power and might, the latter, in all its simplicity, speaks of emptying the self and devotion. Viewed from the perspective of the temple experience, a visitor who enters the temple complex through one of the gateways and directs his steps to the inner sanctum progresses away from the monumental magnitude to the humility of forms and the general atmosphere of ritual intimacy. This architectural ambiguity creates different axes of alignment, one directed towards the centre of the inner space and the other, to the periphery of the outer place that clearly distinguishes two distinct, yet, interlacing worlds. The outer area, distinguishable by the large-scale courtly architecture where the Chola kings staged their political-cum-religious performances watched by their subjects, reflects imperial mindset and self-representation of power; the inner area, unassuming in size and design, where Nataraja performs his sacred dance watched by the devotees, reflects the intimate space of worship. The entanglement of these two different worlds mirrored in the architectural ambiguity of the design exposes the complex and convoluted history of the temple. For the purpose of this chapter, the history of the Nataraja temple can broadly be divided into two periods. The first period, which I shall call, the pre-Chola period, begins with the temple's original shrine built probably sometime in the 6th century, although some scholars date it to the 8th century (Balasubrahmanyan 1963). The second, or the Chola period, dates from the 9th century, when the Chola rulers arrived at Chidambaram, but actually, none of the present buildings of the temple complex can be dated before the 11th century (Satyamurti 1978:17). The pre-Chola period, associated with the original shrine at the centre of the present-day temple, is wrapped up in a veil of mystery. Due to the paucity of evidence and historical records, it is impossible to identify the date and function of the original shrine. Scholars generally agree that the original shrine must have been the location of esoteric ritual inextricably linked

to the earliest form of dancing Shiva. Architecturally, the core shrine has some odd features that were reduplicated in the later Chola-sponsored buildings. In the centuries that followed, the temple expanded around its core, with each additional *prakara* or circumambulatory temple courtyard forming an extra layer enveloping the core. Gradually, the temple's sacred core with its esoteric ritual became de-emphasized, while the outer place, with its majestic halls and courtyards hosting grand-scale festivals and ceremonies, became fashionable. The second period in the history of the temple, associated with the participation of the Chola kings in building the project, is relatively well documented in inscriptions and other historical sources. Looking at the history of the Cholas in Chidambaram, their adoption of Nataraja as royal deity (*kula-devata*) and annexation of Chidambaram Temple space for royal purposes, one can clearly notice the change in the use of space: from exclusively religious space dedicated to the esoteric cult of dancing Shiva to public space of royal performance and festival parades. From the Chola times onwards, we increasingly find Chidambaram as a space that undergoes architectural remodelling marked by expansionism in order to host specific religious-cum-political events. Religious space becomes remodelled as theatrical space to include the audience. The vast halls and open courtyards are commissioned by the Chola kings to accommodate a growing number of spectators. The architectural changes were not only related to the changes in the use of space but also to ideological, political and cultural changes of thought and practice. In the same manner in which the large theatrical spaces for mass spectacles become a primary concern for changes in the architectural design of the Nataraja temple, the ideology behind the cult of Nataraja shifts from the esoteric to the aesthetic. The shift from the esoteric to the aesthetic was enacted by constructing the gaze, in which the beholder was brought under the influence of the powers that dwelled in the auratic presences of the aesthetic objects and spectacles. The Cholas' involvement in the rebuilding project changed the temple axis of orientation from the centre of the core area to the periphery of the outer place. This was accomplished by successively enveloping the centre with additional layers of walls that were not only intended to protect the core but also to direct the sight from the inner gaze of worship to the outer sight of festivals and spectacles that made the access to the inner core more difficult. In my chapter, I will track the changes in the use of space by analyzing the evolution of architectural structures. I argue that these changes were connected with Cholas' agenda to construct the gaze.

## Architectural evolution: changes in form and meaning

### **Cit-sabha and kanaka-sabha: from a thatched hut to the royal temple**

When the Chola kings initially arrived at Chidambaram, they probably saw only a little wooden thatched hut located in the midst of Tillai forest built to enable the practice of esoteric ritual connected with the cult of dancing Shiva. The

historical and architectural evidence suggests that the original shrine to Shiva erected in that place, often called in inscriptions, *cit ambalam* or ‘little hall’ is one of the oldest parts of the temple complex whose odd architectural and stylistic features stand in diametrical contrast with other parts of the temple’s architecture. The original shrine, known today as *cit-sabha*, orients towards the inauspicious south direction, which is certainly at odds with the Hindu architectural canons which emphasize that every shrine must be constructed facing east since it is the most auspicious direction reserved for the gods. The south orientation of the temple determines the entire architectural layout of the temple complex as a whole. The reason for the placement of the main shrine in the south direction may be linked to the fact that the original cult of dancing Shiva worshipped in Chidambaram was the Shiva dancing in the cremation ground (Younger 1995:90). This argument is supported by the early Tamil Shaiva poets such as Karaikkal Ammaiyar (6th century) and Appar (7th century) who often refer to Shiva’s dance in the cremation ground:

. . . on this big cremation ground, You take your stage,  
 You make the *bhutas* come to worship You.  
 O Meritorious One with the tightly worn hero’s anklets,  
 lifting Your leg, You perform the dance.<sup>1</sup>

See the god!  
 See the Lord, see him who dances, holding fire,  
 in the wilderness of the burning-ground [. . .].<sup>2</sup>

In addition, Paul Younger (1995:90) narrates the legend, according to which the site located just opposite to the *cit-sabha* where Nataraja resides, was a cremation ground. In other words, the early layout of the Chidambaram Temple was facing cremation ground that would indicate that Nataraja was dancing in the burial grounds. Another important feature relating to ways of thinking about the Chidambaram sacred space before the arrival of the Chola kings that becomes evident from the descriptions of the early Tamil Shaiva poets is the emphasis put on its natural beauty. The intensity and subtlety of the dancing Shiva’s sacred territory are apparent in its abundant groves, fresh water, fragrant *tillai* trees. Again, the 7th-century Tamil Shaiva saint Appar portrays Chidambaram as ‘the little hall’ of Tillai situated in the midst of blossoming nature where Shiva, watched by the ghostlike devotees, performs his dance.

You can see here the Lord with the light-giving crescent moon,  
 On his head matted locks  
 At the Little Hall of Tillai, which is surrounded by groves that exude  
 honey,  
 And is covered by clouds,  
 The Lord dances with fire in his hand and, makes the darkness go away.<sup>3</sup>

The areca nut palms with many fronds rise high and crowd close to the lofty mansions.

The *valai* fish abound in the water of the fertile fields.

In such a Tillai Lord Shivan's anklet dances in the Little Hall.

After the ghostlike devotees witness the dance, what else would their eyes be able to see?<sup>4</sup>

The little hall of Tillai is none other than the *cit-sabha* and the aforementioned descriptions give us some indication about its surrounding area. It is plausible to say that the original shrine to dancing Shiva, known as *cit-sabha* or 'little hall' was standing amidst luxurious natural scenery in the proximity to the cremation ground. Architecturally, the *cit-sabha* resembles a thatched hut, unassuming in size and decoration. The building is made of timber wood covered by a shingled roof. In general terms, the *cit-sabha*, which represents the temple's sacred core, is just a small, dark room hosting a movable bronze icon of Nataraja and his consort, Shiva-kamasundari. It is set up on the four-foot high stone plinth-like base. The function of the plinth is difficult to determine. It certainly makes the *cit-sabha* isolated from the surrounding environment and mediates the relationship between the deity inside and the devotees outside. Since the plinth, in its function as the pedestal, locates the main shrine above the ground level, it influences the devotee's experience of Nataraja at the eye-level. Within the *cit-sabha*, to Nataraja's right, there is a dark chamber, known as *Chidambaram Rahasya* or 'Chidambaram Secret' totally covered with 1.5 m high and 3.5 m long curtain adorned with a few golden *bilva* leaves hanging in front of a curtain. This little-used area is one of the most enigmatic and perplexing in the entire temple complex. The dark room is said to host the invisible *linga* of space (*akasha-linga*) symbolizing the emptiness unfolding in the lotus of the heart and expanding into the infinite firmament of consciousness as reflected in the fundamental doctrine of *cidambaram*.<sup>5</sup> Scholars generally agree that the *Chidambaram Rahasya* must be reminiscent of the esoteric community of the Shaiva *yogis* dedicated to practices focussing on reaching the emptiness of consciousness. B.G.L. Swamy is even more specific, identifying this esoteric community with the Kashmiri Shaiva *yogis*.<sup>6</sup> Some authors, i.e. Nagaswamy<sup>7</sup> and Zimmer, suggest that the esoteric cult of Nataraja was linked to yogic and tantric practices, especially to the transgressive practices connected with the tantric culture of the cremation grounds where the yogic austerities such as fasting, breathing and meditation in the cremation groves were somehow associated with dance.<sup>8</sup> Adjacent to the *cit-sabha* on the eastern side, but 1 m lower than the *cit-sabha* is the *kanaka-sabha*. It was probably built in the 9th century by the Chola king Parantaka I (Satyamurti 1978:17). Architecturally, the *kanaka-sabha* resembles all the characteristic features of the *cit-sabha*: it has a rectangular shape; it is made of timber wood and covered by a shingled roof supported by wooden pillars. The *kanaka-sabha* is the sacred pavilion where the daily rituals are performed. It is accessed from the eastern side through a large courtyard that serves to accommodate a

larger population than its counterpart in front of the *cit-sabha*. The bas-reliefs displayed in the niches of *kanaka-sabha* in the present-day Chidambaram portray numerous sage-like figures in various yogic poses, which would support the argument about yogic and tantric practices taking place in Chidambaram made by Nagaswamy and Zimmer. Both *sabhas*, located in the central position in the first *prakara*, delimit uniquely religious space formed by means of ritual. The *cit-sabha*, hosting the image of Nataraja, facilitates the iconic form of worship of Nataraja enacted by means of visual engagement with the temple icon, while the *kanaka-sabha* serves as the place for daily rituals. On the other hand, the dark chamber of *Chidambaram Rahasya*, points out to the aniconic, esoteric ritual focussed on yogic practices and inner vision of emptiness. These two different, but complementary types of worship, one engaging the outer sight and the other dedicated to the mastery of the inner sight, embody the dialectical character of the two types of worship: one engaging the senses and its tangible ritual acts and the other transcending the senses as it seeks to nullify the self in order to reach the ultimate emptiness. These two opposing tendencies in the worship of Nataraja seemed to exist side to side in the early history of Chidambaram Temple and the two main *sabhas* in the temple's core area embodied the two imperatives of the divine worship practiced on this religious site. With the arrival of the first Chola kings, the religious space delimited by the two *sabhas* began to experience changes, not in its function, but in its form and significance. These changes were driven by developments within the royal ideology, such as the sudden elevation of Nataraja to the position of the royal god<sup>9</sup> and by shifting in values as the religious space of the two *sabhas* became increasingly associated with the royal ethos. The first Chola king who initiated remodelling of Chidambaram was Parantaka I (r.907–54),<sup>10</sup> the son of Aditya I. Two copper inscriptions (Tiruvalangadu plates and Udayendiram plates) commemorate the event of gilding the roof of Chidambaram Temple with gold.<sup>11</sup> Even though the royal gift did not have any impact of the temple's function, as it continued as a religious space dedicated to the worship of Nataraja, covering the roof of the *sabhas* with gold changed the *sabhas* form and significance. The change in form was reflected in remodelling of the roof: from a modest thatched hut roof to the golden roof, while the change in significance was affected by hybridization of space, successfully blending religious and royal meanings. The royalization of Nataraja, which, according to some scholars, was most probably also introduced by Parantaka I,<sup>12</sup> and gilding the roof with gold established the ideological and ritual bond between the Nataraja Chidambaram Temple and the Chola kings that continued over three centuries until the empire's decline by the end of the 13th century. Nataraja as a royal god and Chidambaram as a royal temple were adopted by the Chola kings to legitimize the dynasty's power. By ascribing to Nataraja and his temple the royal ethos, the Chola rulers also began to use them to implement the principles of aesthetic politics in order to rule their subjects. The aesthetic politics was based on the deliberate construction of gaze in which the beholder was brought under the influence of the powers that dwelled in the auratic presences of the aesthetic objects and spectacles. I define

'auratic presence' as a mode of presence that has an aura or a mysterious quality, which conveys more meaning than the ordinary appearance. It is important to notice that aura is not inherent in the object itself, it is rather built up around the object unintentionally through the ideological framework that clearly influences the beholder's perception. Perhaps, the first aesthetic object endowed with auratic presence was the golden roof of the Chidambaram Temple. As pointed out by Paul Younger (1995:112), the early Tamil Shaiva poets praise Nataraja dancing in the little hall of Tillai forest, while the latter bards, shift the rhetoric from its natural beauty to its golden dome that is perceived as something akin to divine. Moreover, the proliferation of visual images endowed with auratic presences acted as a tool of legitimation of a political action. The aesthetic objects had the capacity to legitimize Cholas' authority in the region because they were based on *representational fallacy* in which the political meanings began to be encoded in the visual display and self-representation of power (Jay 1992). As a result, the golden roof was not only connoted with divinity but also with royalty as the ideological framework of monarchial authority embedded in the golden roof alerted the viewer to the temple's royal status. Another object that underwent a radical makeover to fit into the aesthetic agenda of the Chola kings was the icon of Nataraja itself.<sup>13</sup> The bronze image of a classical Nataraja, as it is known today, is the creation of the Chola dynasty (9th–13th century) who, in order to establish the homologization between the royal and the sacred, perfected Nataraja's dancing pose and made it to fit into a graceful posture of a royal god. As has been pointed out by scholars (Smith, Younger), Shiva's dancing pose before the 10th century is significantly different from a classical Nataraja. According to Smith (1996:6), the sophisticated Nataraja bronzes came into being because of the Chola's 'aesthetic sublimation' in which "Dionysian power of nature symbolized by Rudra dance in the burial grounds was overcome by Apollonian cultural sublimation exemplified in a classical Nataraja". Nowadays only an epithet of *tandava*<sup>14</sup> 'frantic dancing'<sup>15</sup> given to Nataraja's 'dance of bliss' (*ananda-tandava*) reminds us of Shiva's early association with destructive, violent dancing in the cremation grounds (Smith 1996:3). Used as the tool of aesthetic politics, Nataraja became a spiritual and political asset reckoned as a mysterious symbol of the aesthetic power that evoked in viewers a sense of enigmatic dignity fitting only royalty (Dehejia 2002:22). The visual regime of the Cholas sought to confirm its own legitimating power through the spectacular auratic presence emanating from the golden roof, from the bronze images of Nataraja that was in concomitance with the organization of visual perception through aesthetic means.

### **Deva-sabha: homologization of the sacred and the royal**

In the centuries that followed, the Chola rulers recognized how the legitimization of royal power through aesthetic means and aligning themselves to the Nataraja 'royal' temple was a crucial element of aesthetic politics aimed at creating the society of spectators. The subsequent Chola kings, Rajaraja, Rajendra and



**FIGURE 8.1** Golden roof of Nataraja Chidambaram Temple

Source: Courtesy Dinesh Kumar/Flickr Cultural Commons



**FIGURE 8.2** Shiva as the Lord of Dance, 10th century, Tamil Nadu: Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Source: Ashley Van Haeften/Flickr





**FIGURE 8.3** Shiva performing ananda-tandava, 18th century, Andhra Pradesh: Los Angeles County Museum of Art

*Source:* Courtesy Ashley Van Haeften/Flickr Cultural Commons

Virarajendra were praised for their tangible initiatives that enhanced the temple's status as the royal coronation site. Virarajendra<sup>16</sup> (r. 1063–1069) “mentioned his gift of a ruby fixed in the crown of Chidambaram Nataraja, suggesting that this gift-giving safeguarded his accession to the Chola throne in 1063”.<sup>17</sup> Surveying historical records suggest that the architectural interventions continued and amplified under the reign of Kulottunga I (r. 1070–1125) who contributed significantly to the establishing of the Chidambaram Nataraja temple as a place of prominence. There is no doubt that Kulottunga I and his general Naralokaviran, who was successively elevated to the rank of his and his successor's chief minister, had a strong desire to change both the meaning and function of the Chidambaram Temple. Their physical reforms consisted of the radical rebuilding

of the most ancient parts of the temple, the *nrtta-sabha* and building of the most distinguished and expensive structures for particular royal purposes, such as the *deva-sabha*. Both of these architectural changes were closely related to changes in the use of space. The *deva-sabha*, often referred to in the early inscriptions as the ‘great hall’ is situated in the northeast corner in the second *prakara*. It is almost 50-foot square; that makes it four times bigger than the *cit-sabha/kanaka-sabha* core area and two stories higher. The copper plate roof of *deva-sabha* replicates a thatched roof in the core area. Inscriptions suggest that the *deva-sabha* was built for the purpose of royal visits (Nanda 2004:17). Some inscriptions describe it as a royal audience hall. The *deva-sabha* thus demarcated a zone of royal authority that acted as a counterpart of the sacred core area inhabited by Nataraja. Its enormous size, greater than any structure of the temple at that time, was both a demonstration of Chola power and a clear declaration of personal prestige derived from the association with a spiritual force of Nataraja that the Chola kings claimed to embody. The construction of enormous *deva-sabha* within the premises of the sacred space dedicated to dancing Shiva was used as a legitimizing tool meant to direct the perception of people towards the idea of lordship that homologized king to god. The idea of divine lordship was communicated through the enormous size structure of ‘great hall’ of royalty that stood in stark contrast with the ‘little hall’ of god and was designed to convey the magnitude of royal power exceeding even the power of gods. The construction of *deva-sabha* was a part and parcel of a politicization of religion in which “the sacred and secular spheres of royal functions became almost indistinguishable” (Champakalakshmi 2011:554). Just like in the cult of Nataraja where the relationship between the devotee and the god was articulated by a dialectical relationship between the spectator viewing the performer/Nataraja, so the relationship between the man at court and the king was portrayed as a form of spectatorship. According to Daud Ali (2004:134): “the ambition of a man at court was not to receive the king’s audience, but to gain a viewing (*darshana*) of him”. ‘Viewing the king’ was consistent with an ideal of spectatorship promoted by *kavya* literature: “being a spectator was one of the qualities of a noble man” (Ali 2004:189). Thus, spectators viewing the king or Nataraja inside the temple partook in the aesthetically constructed reality of religious experience. The construction of *deva-sabha* inside the Nataraja temple was intended to convey the mighty power of the Chola kings based on the homologization system that provided a strong affiliation between religious and political forms. Within the structural taxonomy of lordship that homologized king to god, visible in almost every aspect of mediaeval life (Ali 2004:104), the same ‘sight’ cast upon the deity was also directed upon the king. The spectators were placed in relation to the deity whom they came to worship, but also in relation to the king whose cult was directly linked to the deity. The aesthetic politics of the Chola kings transfigured the given structures of the power grounded in the religious and metaphysical understanding of Nataraja through a strategic appeal to the sense perception of sight through an effective rhetoric of proximity and total presence.



**RE 8.4** Inside the Nataraja Chidambaram Temple

Source: Courtesy Dinesh Kumar/Flickr Cultural Commons

### ***Nr̥tta-sabha and four cardinal streets: festival as the cultural practice of Chola Chidambaram***

The Cholas' vision to create the society of spectators required a new cultural practice that would constantly reaffirm homologization between the god and the king by employing the same mechanism of image formation. This was accomplished by situating both in the context of festival procession or spectacle that belonged to the category of performance which suggested different ways of looking at time and space, and actors. The refurbishing of *nr̥tta-sabha* in the second *prakara* and the construction of *raja-sabha* in the third *prakara* intended to communicate this new cultural practice that placed festival at the centre of Chola Chidambaram. Festival was the most effective tool for staging the royal selfhood that used to schematize the political and the religious to the same format of image-making relying on cosmic parallelism. The recorded history of the Chola period justify to the fact that the ten-days festivals performed monthly in the temples were directly linked with the personal asterism of the ruler: either with the day of the king's accession or the day of his natal star (Swaminathan 1978:270–274). Through sharing the same natal star, the identity of the king was connected to that of the deity and through this connection, the king's persona acquired both cosmic and divine identity. During the festival, the king and the god were taking part in procession when they drove in processional chariots throughout the city. In most general terms, procession in chariots conveyed the idea of dominion over territorial space conveyed by movement. Kulottunga I must have been an avid patron of festivals since he initiated a change in the architectural design of the temples, which began to be shaped as a chariot with wheels drawn by prancing horses. The earliest example of this new architectural style is the Amrtaghateshvara temple<sup>18</sup> at Melakkadambur (Lorenzetti 2008:185–212)

rebuilt by Kulottunga I. The temple hosts the ten-armed bronze status of Shiva dancing on the bull surrounded by eight devotees. The same chariot-shaped design is attested as *nrntta-sabha* in the Chidambaram Temple, in the second wall of enclosures opposite the main core area where Nataraja resides. Most probably *nrntta-sabha* was built by Kulottunga I (Balasubrahmnayam 1963:54–55). The 12th-century construction of the temple-chariots initiated by Kulottunga I became a fashion with the Cholas. Besides Chidambaram and Melakkadambur, the chariot-shaped temples are found in Darasuram, Tribhuvanam, Tiruvarur (Tanjavur District) and so on (Kalidos 1984:160). Art historians who studied the chariot-temples of the mediaeval Tamil Nadu (e.g. Kalidos 1984; Mevissen 1996; Lorenzetti 2008) conform to the view that the temple-chariots and *ratha-mandapas*, like *nrntta-sabha* were conceived as processional chariots (*ratha, ter*) that meant to convey the idea of movement linked to cosmic symbolism.<sup>19</sup> The sudden mushrooming of the temple-chariots in the Chola territory could be seen as a visual declaration of a new cultural practice of festival that informed interrelationships between religious ideas and cultural forms and practices that affected social space. The public procession of gods, mounted on temple-chariots, carried out during these festivals were often accompanied by royal processions. In this way, religious festivals could be seen as political propaganda that, through this powerful display of royal magnificence, used to legitimize sacredness of the royal power and the divine status of the king. Even though the festivals in honour of gods and Chola kings were celebrated at least since the time of Rajaraja I, still the history presents us with much evidence for the increment in the festival practice during the reign of Vikrama Chola who sought to promote the Nataraja temple at Chidambaram as the most important Shaiva centre in South India (Davis 2009:19). Vikrama Chola (r.1118–35) donated many processional icons (*utsava-murtis*) to the temple that were plated with gold. During his reign, the Chidambaram Temple was enlarged with two inner walls of enclosure and the gateways of the towers (*gopurams*). He also built four streets around the temple that were meant for the procession of the chariot during the festivals (Jain 1989:2). If the *nrntta-sabha* designed as a chariot was merely a symbolic reflection of the new ideology that placed the cultural practice of festival at the centre of religio-political affairs, the laying out the four streets by Vikrama Chola was intended to directly implement this practice into the actual space around the Chidambaram Temple territory. With four streets running towards the cardinal directions, the Chola kings were able to launch their political spectacles that inspired a revitalization of a literary genre of the processional poems written in Tamil, known as *ula*. According to Blake Wentworth (2011:132) who did a study on this theme, the 12th century saw a rapid proliferation of *ulas* that emerged as a celebrated expression of royal power. Ottakuttar, a court poet for three successive generations of Chola kings: Vikrama Chola, Kulottunga II and Rajaraja II assigned to it a new feature of a declaration of power, meant to enhance their political status. *Ulas* conveyed sovereignty by praising procession of kings and god performed during the festivals. Procession itself was rooted in the idea of the power subordinated to

the ordering of sacred territory around the four cardinal streets that was equated with the royal conquest of four directions (*digvijaya*). During the festivals, the king and god rode in a chariot through the four streets around the centre of the temple. The claim of dominion over territorial space was conveyed through *movement* that was homologized to the conquest of four directions (Sax 2000:43). In the context of aesthetic politics, the festival parade was the most spectacular visual declaration of royal power, populated by large crowds. It was a stage for Cholas' political theatre that conflated political action with principles of religious experience and aesthetic mode of sense perception in order to consecrate power as auratic presence.

### **Raja-sabha: the royal spectacles and the creation of emotional focus**

The policies of temple construction projects carried out by Vikrama Chola continued with Kulottunga II. During the reign of those two kings, Chidambaram increased six times to its previous size. Both monarchs also preferred to live in Chidambaram, rather than in the capital city of Gangaikondacolapuram. Kulottunga II built the eastern *gopurams*, which became the main entrance for *utsavamurtis* during the festivals and *raja-sabha*, known also as Hundred Pillar Hall (Dikshitar 1965:5). Architecturally, the *raja-sabha* resembled a royal hall with the multitude of granite pillars arranged symmetrically, making 984 in total. The colossal roof was a replica of thatched roofs found in other *sabhas*. Insofar as the function of the *raja-sabha* is concerned, it is plausible to say that it was primarily meant for public ceremonies that could accommodate a large crowd of spectators. Some say it was used for the royal coronation of kings or *rajyabhiseka* (Inden 1978:54). There is, however, no inscriptional or historical evidence that would support this claim. Others assert it was a place of festive activity (Nanda 2004:96). Following the evidence of great festival activity taking place in Chidambaram, I would argue that *raja-sabha* was meant for royal spectacles that would concentrate on the enactment of monarchical authority in the public realm, on the total visibility of power. With the platform as a stage at the one end of *raja-sabha*, the king positioned himself higher than others, from which he could convey an aura of authority to the audience standing in an open hall in front of the stage. The royal spectacles employed auratic gaze founded on a dialectical interplay of proximity and distance. In the *Work of Art*, Walter Benjamin (2010:518) who coined this term, defines the 'auratic gaze' as "the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close the object may be". The 'auratic gaze' presupposes metaphysical distance from the object of perception even if the object itself is physically close. In other words, the 'auratic gaze' is a unique form of spectatorship, which invests the objects of perception with an aura of dignity and glory. Modern performance theories (e.g. Kenneth Burke) suggest that the maintenance of distance is one of the most efficient ways through which the sense of wonder can be generated in the audience. But the organization of space with a clearly demarcated stage creates a distance between the performer and the

spectator. This distance has to be covered by the gaze of the spectator that happens by creating a focus, an emotional focus, that makes the spectators engage in the spectacle. The creation of emotional focus that diminishes the distance between the performer and the spectator is accomplished through certain techniques. In the case of the Cholas, the ideology of *bhakti* became useful, especially with the narratives of Krishna and *gopis* that were taken up to articulate the relationship between the king and his subjects in terms of devotional love (Howes 2003:112). The Chola rulers incorporated devotional mode of spectatorship derived from *bhakti* turning it into a mechanism of domination commanding people, especially the female subjects, how to look and what to feel. The distance in the spatial arrangement was thus covered by creating emotional focus, by incorporating gaze and desire as the ways of relating to authority. Surveying the processional poems written for the Chola kings, who initiated architectural remodelling of the Chidambaram Temple, we come to understand that to be in love with the Chola king whose capacity to arouse emotions in women gazing at him was comparable with *gopis'* love for Krishna was used as formal, stylistic convention for representing an ideal of *bhakti*. Here, the gaze was constructed in such a way as to illustrate Chola king's ability to exert an actual supremacy over a woman by being an object of her desire. What is the relationship between desire and gazing? To answer this question we must take a closer look at the instances in which desire and gaze come together.

The very nature of desire is 'wanting something', 'longing for something', 'being anxious for something'. This thirst (*trsna*) for the objects of perception is inherently present in desire. Thus, 'desire' implies 'thirst', the latter being semantically connected with longing and anxiety, is at the very centre of *bhakti* ideology. These affective responses were inherently presupposed in the act of gazing at Krishna that concentrated on his physical, sensual appearance with a special emphasis on his enchanting beauty that stimulated an arousal of desire in women watching him. Thus, 'thirst' or 'craving' for the object of desire was connected with the impressions conveyed by the senses, particularly, the eyes. The eyes, as the visual recipients of Krishna's sensuous, physical form acted as the actual trigger for an arousal of desire to be united with him fully. One of the most frequent metaphors used in reference to 'thirst', understood along with explicitly sensuous overtones, is 'drinking' of Krishna's beauty with the eyes (Hardy 2001:75–76). Here, thirst and gaze coalesce into each other. But, gazing at Krishna implies a whole plethora of emotional, conative and cognitive states, which clearly illustrate emotional domination over female psyche. In effect, the mind and heart<sup>20</sup> of the woman who concentrates her attention on Krishna is often expressed in the language of military conquest in which she is seized, caught, overpowered (*grhita*), snatched away, stolen (*apahrta*), pained, heated (*tapta*), seized, overcome . . . etc. (Hardy 2001:533). Among other psychological states that resonate with emotional crisis are those who among the ten stages of 'love in separation' (*viraha*) list: mental confusion (*unmada*), swooning (*murcha*), depression (*udvega*) and death (*marana*). To this list, the so-called negative affective expressions consisting of horripilation, weeping, sweating, swooning should

be added. Generally, they are meant to evoke a severe emotional tension constituting ‘love experience’. Now if we look at the female gaze described in the *ulas* of the Chola kings, we are struck to find deliberate parallels between the emotional response aroused in women seeing Krishna and the Chola king going in procession. As the *ula* of Vikrama Chola (vv.97–99) informs us, women ‘arrive in haste’, with ‘eyes roaming everywhere, thoughts roaming too’ and with ‘heads bent low in reverence’<sup>21</sup> These verses clearly point out towards mental and emotional disturbance accompanying ‘seeing’ which, however, does not exclude the attitude of devotional surrender. In the next verses (vv.159–160, v.168), the relationship between seeing the king and the arousal of desire is explicitly drawn again in the context of worship:

The woman could not bring back her eyes, could not free hands cupped in worship she had no way to rescue her mind from obsession. A passion she had never known before arose, and bewildered – braid slipping, garland slipping . . . filled with desire, she sees nothing else but him.<sup>22</sup>

Her sight is arrested, captured in the vision of the passing king; this image perpetuates the arousal of insatiable desire that makes her loose the garments adorning her body. What is this mighty vision of the king like? The verses (vv.258–259) call upon the amorphous nature of light, glaring and bedazzling that cannot be captured by any visible form insofar as the king “seemed to be like the sun to her when she saw him pass by, body filled with light”. The king is the gilded monarch, resplendent in the sun’s divine light. The woman reacts to the vision of the passing king as though she has come face-to-face with a divine being. She reacts with a powerful sense of reverence and awe, and these feelings play a significant role in governing her behaviour.

The metaphor of quenching the thirst of desire through ‘drinking’ the Chola king with the eyes, similar to the one that occurs in the love for Krishna, appears again in the poetic verses of the *ula* where “women with long honeyed braids called out to him, so staring with blossoming eyes as if drinking him in”. An effect of this ‘ocular drink’ on women psyche is surely intoxicating, since, as we learn from the next verse, ‘women grew weak and faded’.<sup>23</sup> This is a classic example of the psychology of affect, which normally accompanies a psychological crisis. Seeing the Chola king is an overwhelming experience, “approaching him, she worshiped – her strength failed – she trembled – she swooned – she wept – she was entirely alone”.<sup>24</sup> Here we notice a wide range of psychophysical states that clearly expose woman’s essential weakness and vulnerability; she ultimately collapses at the weight of this ocular experience. This emotional anxiety is expressed further by the metaphor of ‘melting’ in which “she loses all sense of balance, melting in the fire that flares from the arrows of the bodiless god, who carries a sugarcane bow” [that is the God of Love ‘Kamadeva’].<sup>25</sup> ‘Melting in the fire’ suggests pain and anguish arising from destabilizing love experience that debilitates the psychophysical mind-body complex resulting in a total breakdown.

Surveying the verses of the *ulas* that describe emotional responses of women viewing the Chola kings going in procession, one can identify a certain logical pattern which bestows on us an understanding of the ways in which the Cholas sought to control their subjects by controlling the inner self. The ideologies of power were ascribed to the very mode of visual perception and, even more importantly, to the emotional response that yielded affective submission to the authority of the king. By establishing parallels between the god and the king and by employing mechanisms of image formation and projection of desire as a way of personally relating to the authority, the Cholas harnessed the power of the emotion of love into the tool of psychological domination. 'Love' became a relational bond of surrender to the supernatural agency of the king, which relegated others to the subservient position of spectators, leaving their inner self empty of independent existence, as a relationally defined, helpless and vulnerable. The 'auratic gaze' cast upon the king resulted in the experience of deep pain replacing rational participation with emotional synchronization. The aura of beauty surrounding the object of perception 'took possession' of the spectators that consequently yielded the aesthetics of submission and obedience to the authority. The aesthetic politics based on a deliberative orchestration of the sense perception of sight brought about the control through emotional effects. This, in turn, generated a paralyzing submission to the ruler that took the audience by awe.



**FIGURE 8.5** Raja-sabha

Source: Courtesy Varun Shiv Kapur/Flickr Cultural Commons.



## Conclusion

During the Chola reign, religion, arts and politics were inextricably intertwined. The makeover of the religious image of Nataraja and progressive change in the architectural design of the Nataraja Chidambaram Temple described earlier served as “a metaphor for a royal power [ . . . ] and also as an ideological tool for the Chola monarchy”.<sup>26</sup> As R. Champakalakshmi (2011:465) rightly pointed out, art and architecture as disseminators of ideological ideas and “transmitters of messages to the audience” are “constructed by and construct cultural and political perceptions”. In the middle of the 9th century, mutually inclusive processes of the politicization of religion and the aestheticization of politics began to influence the way in which the space of Chidambaram Temple began to be remodelled to suit dynastic interests of the Chola rulers. While the politicization of religion led to the situation in which “the sacred and secular spheres of royal functions became almost indistinguishable” (Champakalakshmi 2011:488) the aestheticization of politics used aesthetic paradigm as a representation of power. The aesthetic politics of the Chola kings was structured upon a deliberative orchestration of the sense perception of sight in which the beholder was brought under the influence of the powers that dwelled in the auratic presences of the aesthetic objects and spectacles. Nataraja, with his dynamic form of the sovereign dancer engendered the very form of perception through which the Chola monarch wanted and was seen. Festivals and spectacles rested on the conscious manipulation of visual perception, which suggested different ways of looking at time and space, and actors. Festive performances gave entry into suspended temporality, into monumental time, which had a massive presence insofar as eyewitnesses were enticed to participate in the sacred event unfolding before their eyes. Performance was present in the temporal and spatial sense: it was happening here and now. ‘Here’ was, however, a liminal field, for it made it possible to merge meanings so that the relationship between the king and the god was derived from their interdependent semiosis and not from ascription to objective referent (George 1999:28). The Nataraja Chidambaram Temple provided a stage for the display of Chola’s aesthetic politics and imagery that conflated the religious and the political. Despite alternations and gaps in the history, the temple offers compelling evidence of a carefully planned visual programme that was meant to create the society of spectators. This is visible in the gradual, but consistent expansionism of the temple’s core that slowly encompasses the sacred core area. The new buildings erected for the purpose of spectacles and royal ceremonies, as well as the inclusion of the space at the periphery in order to facilitate festival processions, shifted the temple’s axis from the esoteric and aesthetic. Through the utilizing strategies of appropriation and juxtaposition between the god and the king, the Cholas shaped society’s perception that ushered a visual transference of the ‘auratic gaze’ from the god to the king. The festival parade relied heavily on the visual aesthetics and thus played exclusively on the effective register of the spectator. Unlike verbal language, visual forms are capable of

articulation, which is not discursive. According to Langer (1961:79–102), there is a distinction between the meanings conveyed through verbal language and those expressed through visual forms. She says that while the meanings given through verbal language are understood successively, those given through visual forms are grasped in one act of vision (Langer 1961:82). She calls this ‘presentational symbolism’, indicating that the visual objects are grasped not by reasoning but by feeling (Langer 1961:102). The ‘rule of sight’ coded with cultural values of *bhakti* ideology that instructed the spectators how to feel, manipulating their emotional response, served as a basic paradigm for legitimating political authority through aesthetic means.

## Notes

- 1 *Tiruvirattai Manimalai* of Karaikkal Ammaiyar, v. 15, in Craddock (2010:53).
- 2 Appar VI.301.1 in Peterson (1998:112).
- 3 Appar, quoted in Younger (1995:202).
- 4 Appar poem 3, quoted in Younger (1995:204).
- 5 Shivaramamurti (1973:383) says: “It is very interesting that there is a hall beyond, all empty, to suggest space, *akasha*. A screen here, when pulled aside, reveals just space, with no real image in it except what fancy may imagine as present in the sky. . . . This representation of ether, space or void, represents the *rahasya* of *chidambara*, or the mystery”.
- 6 See Swamy (1979). Swamy’s argument was rejected by Zvelebil, Younger and Smith.
- 7 About early shakta/tantric tendencies in Nataraja’s cult, see Nagaswamy (2003:131–138).
- 8 Zimmer (1991:151).
- 9 The relationship between the ‘royal god’ and the divine kings was founded on the idea of a divine kingship in which a ‘royal god’ adopted by a monarch was able to legitimize dynasty’s power. In other words, the ‘royal god’ was used as a political agenda of a ruler who was using theology to rule his subjects. See Inden (1990:170, 1981:134–155). About royalization of gods in mediaeval India, see Kulke and Rothermund (1991:146).
- 10 For a study dedicated exclusively to Parantaka I, see Swaminathan (1998).
- 11 With pure gold brought from all the quarters, which were subdued by the prowess of his own arm, this banner of solar race [i.e. Parantaka] covered the mansion of Indramauli [Shiva] at Vyaghraharahara [Chidambaram]. *EI* 22, # 34, verse 17, 256. He [Parantaka] built for Purari [Shiva], who was before this on the silver mountain [Kailasa], a golden house called Dabhra-Sabha and thus put to shame his [Shiva’s] friend, the lord of wealth [Kubera], by his immense riches. *SII* 3.3, # 205, verse 53.
- 12 cf. Swaminathan (1998:133).
- 13 Historically speaking, the introduction and development of the image of Shiva as the Lord of Dance (Natesha) begins in Tondaimandalam under the Pallava rule in the 7th century. However, it was not before the 10th century, under the patronage of the Chola queen Semibyan Mahadevi, that the image of a classical Nataraja in a graceful *ananda-tandava* pose was created (Kaimal 1996:61).
- 14 Hart (1975:40) summarizes the Tamil fascination with ‘*tandava*’ ‘frantic dance of destruction’ in the following words: “the disposition of the Tamils to see the return to the chaos that precedes creation in situations of danger and death led them to give great importance to the ‘*tandava*’, Shiva’s dance of destruction at the end of the world. Indeed, the ‘*tandava*’ is of Dravidian origin”. Bose (2001:16), basing his description on the *Natyashastra* gives a different explanation of the *tandava*, according to which it is the form of dance that aims at *devastuti*, ‘praise offerings to the gods’.
- 15 Cf. Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary translates *tandava* as “a type of dancing accompanied by violent gesticulation”, “frantic dance of Shiva and his votaries”.
- 16 On Virarajendra’s extensive ‘looting practice’, see Davis (1993:26–27).

- 17 *SII* 371 of 1901; 173 of 194, in Hall (2001:91).
- 18 According to Balasubrahmanyam (1963:48): “The origin of the temple dedicated to Shiva can be traced back to the Tamil Shaiva saint Appar (7th century) who used to sing about this ancient temple with the name of Karakkoyil (stone-temple). No architectural remains of original shrine have persisted to our times. Epigraphic inscriptions found on the main south wall indicate that the temple was renovated during 43rd year of Kulottunga I, around 1113”.
- 19 For example, the asterism of Rajendra Chola was Ardra, known also as Arudra (for the presiding deity of this asterism was Rudra), it was also a natal star of Nataraja. During this festival, drama, dance and singing of bhakti hymns, as well as the processions of god and king, were performed. Since both the ruler and the god shared the same asterism, the festival called ‘Rajendra Colan Tirunal’ (‘The Sacred Day of Rajendra Chola’) was organized in honour of the king. *ARE* 104 of 1913, Swaminathan (1978:274). Even though glorious times of the Cōla kings are long gone, the annual festival known as the *Ardra Darshanam Mahotsava* celebrated as Nataraja’s birthday is still observed today. Similarly, the second annual Nataraja festival, known as *Ani Mahotsava*, still performed today in Chidambaram, was initially associated with the asterism of Uttirattadi or Uttara Bhadrappada, the natal star of Vikrama Chola. Swaminathan (1978:273).
- 20 As Karen Pechilis Prentiss (1999:53) clarifies, in Tamil *bhakti* tradition, the ‘mind’ and ‘heart’ are linguistically expressed by the same Sanskrit-derived word in Tamil, *maṇam*.
- 21 *Vikkirama Colan Ula of Ottakkuttar*, v. 97–99, cf. Wentworth (2011:367).
- 22 *Vikkirama Colan Ula of Ottakkuttar*, vv.159–160, v.168, cf. Wentworth (2011:372–372).
- 23 *Vikkirama Colan Ula of Ottakkuttar*, vv.120–122. Wentworth (2011:397).
- 24 *Kulottunka Colann Ula of Ottakkuttar*, v. 218. Wentworth (2011:376).
- 25 *Kulottunka Colann Ula of Ottakkuttar*, v. 246. Wentworth (2011: 379).
- 26 Champakalakshmi (2011:488).

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