

[Where Siva Dances](#)

Category : [July 1995](#)

Published by Anonymous on Jul. 01, 1995

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It is at the Chidambaram temple that Lord Siva as Nataraja performed the "Dance of Bliss" for the liberation of all souls.

Chidambaram is a moksha temple, a place of liberation where countless saints and devotees have attained final oneness with the Supreme. The name is from chit, meaning consciousness, and ambaram, meaning vast unmeasurable space. Chidambaram is both the heart center of the universe and of the soul, where Siva performs the Ananda Tandava, "Dance of Bliss." His five great energies-creation, preservation, destruction and the two graces, revealing and concealing-pulsate outwards as He dances before all the Gods and men. In this three-page section on Chidambaram, we'll speak first (and all too briefly) on the temple, its history, priesthood, and present-day status, and on the next two pages the metaphysics and miracles of Siva Nataraja and His divine dance hall.

The Sri Nataraja Temple of Chidambaram is located in Tamil Nadu, India, 140 miles south of Madras. Here one can still see and enjoy the wealth for which Hindu temples were renowned. For example, 21,600 individual solid gold tiles-one for each breath a man takes in a day-adorn the central sanctum roof. A priceless six-inch-high ruby Nataraja statue is worshiped daily, and the other temple jewels are worth tens of millions. The vast thousand-pillared and hundred-pillared halls stand in their original granite glory. The 30-foot outermost wall and 250-foot gopurams encompass forty acres. The worship is carried on by a unique clan of Saiva priests, the Dikshitaras, who have for untold centuries served this and only this temple, possibly the oldest in South India.

Like other great temples, Chidambaram's origins are unknown. In recorded history, it is first noted for the presence of sages-most especially Patanjali, author of the Yoga Sutras and Vyaghrapada, he of "tiger feet" who daily worshiped the Srimulanadar Siva Linga in a forest. The lifetime of the two sages has been variously placed between 200 bce and 1200 bce. Their contemporary, Rishi Tirumular, wrote extensively about Chidambaram's great power in his deeply

mystical work, Tirumantiram [see following pages]. The area was originally called Tillaivanam, "forest of golden shower trees," and comprised the Linga, the Sivaganga tank (reservoir) and the nearby Adi Vinayaka shrine. To this day there are many ashrams in Chidambaram, including branches of Dharmapura Aadheenam and Kasi Mutt.

The temple came into prominence after Pandyan King Simhavarman II (550-575ce) was cured of leprosy by a bath in the Sivaganga tank. He became known as Hiranyavarman ("golden-bodied") and set about to expand the simple forest shrine. It is likely that the Chitsabha, the central sanctum of the temple, is his construction. Next came the Chola kings in the 9th century, each of whom vied with his predecessor for lavish, if not always orderly, expansion of the temple where they were crowned. Parantaka I (907-955ce) roofed the Chitsabha with the solid gold tiles-booty from a successful conquest. Other kings built the 100- and 1,000-pillared halls, established the elaborate car festivals, covered more of the temple in gold and erected the ornate towering gopurams. The temple's royal patronage ended abruptly in the 18th century.

Wealth of another sort had accrued for the temple in the form of the Tamil saints Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar of the 7th and 8th century. Each visited Chidambaram and worshiped Nataraja in a state of awe and bliss. Appar considered the ground so sacred that he would not put his foot on it, and instead rolled all the way from the entrance to the Chitsabha and back. Sambandar considered himself unworthy to stay overnight in the town and came and went from a distant camp. Their many songs to Nataraja and miracles in His name created a Saiva renaissance, permanently removing any significant Buddhist and Jain influence from the area.

Unfortunately, their works, collectively known as the Devaram, were mostly lost shortly thereafter and only rediscovered by the most famous king associated with Chidambaram: Rajaraja Chola I (988-1016ce). Advised by Saint Nambi Andar Nambi that the Devaram existed in a sealed room at Chidambaram, the maharaja oversaw their recovery, codification and popularization, again fueling a wide-spread Saiva revival.

Chidambaram escaped the wholesale destruction of Hindu temples which occurred across North India. But in the 18th century the strategically important sanctuary came under successive occupations by Haider Ali of Mysore (father of Tipu Sultan),

the French and the English. None looted or deliberately desecrated the temple, but the battle damage was extensive and is still apparent today. Many mandapams and sanctums disappeared and others were ruined. When the temple, like the rest of Bharat, ended up in the hands of the East India Company, normalcy of worship was restored, and ownership of the temple was invested in the Dikshitaras collectively. Since the 19th century, wealthy families have spent vast sums on the restoration and improvement, including a Rs 65-million renovation in the 1980s.

The Dikshitaras are the traditional hereditary priesthood of Chidambaram, said to have come directly from Mount Kailasa. They originally numbered 3,000, but today just 280 families remain. Neither unmarried men nor widowers may serve as priests for the puja. Eligible men take turns daily as head priest for the rituals. They receive 90% of the offerings, with 10% going for upkeep of the temple. These dedicated Dikshitaras are an impoverished group. None has ever permanently left the group for other professions, but a low birth rate is causing concern for their future. Pujas are performed according to their Patanjali Padhati, a manual of Vedic chants and ritual instruction. When asked, the priests will explain that if the pujas were not performed here for even one day, Siva would cease His dance and the entire universe would come to a halt.

With reports from Gowri Shankar, Madras