

Indra As Supreme Dancer in Jaina Tradition And Art

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In *Vedic-Purāṇic* tradition Śiva is generally conceived as the Supreme Dancer and accordingly addressed as Natarāja, Naṭeśa, Nāṭyeśvara and Narteśvara¹. As a natural corollary independent images of dancing Śiva are found in profuse number from all over the country from about 5th-6th century C.E. onwards. In the medieval period the dancing form of Śiva as Natarāja became the most favoured subject of representation in Chola art, especially the bronzes. Looking back at the origin of Indian culture, it can be however noticed that Indra, enjoying the highest veneration in *Vedic* period due to his direct link with the Āryan people, was visualised mostly as involved in the activity of dance. In more than a dozen hymns of the *R̥gveda*, epithets concerning dance are used in reference to Indra. He is described as the dancer (*nṛtu*) in battle, who has destroyed ninety cities with his vajra (thunderbolt)². On the other hand he is also identified as the benevolent dancer who gives plenteous food and is prayed for bringing riches³. He is further invoked as he who makes the other dance or causes to dance⁴. When Indra assumed the character of celestial king in the *Atharvaveda*⁵, he has been closely associated with the *apsarases*, who became the favourite dancers and musicians of his court. The fondness of the *apsarases* for dance is so prominent that, even when they are not represented in proper dancing attitude, their postures are suggestive of dance movement as shown in the sculptural renderings of *patralekhnā*, *darpaṇā*, *putravallabhā*, *vivastrajaghñā*, *alasa kanyā*, etc.

Despite the profuseness of the dancing figures of *apsarases* in Indian art, strangely enough no image of dancing Indra has been so far discovered at the sites of the Brahmanical temples in India. That is perhaps because Indra has subsequently lost the status of independent god and was assigned a subsidiary position in the group of the eight *dikpālas* as the guardian deity of the east and also because the character of Indra as Supreme Dancer has been assimilated into the dancing form of Śiva, whose dancing exploits are repeatedly

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mentioned in the *Mahābhārata*, *Purāṇas* and *Nāṭyaśāstra*⁶. It is interesting to note that the *Vedic* tradition of dancing Indra has instead been preserved in Jain context as demonstrated by the Jain literary references and artistic examples, both in sculpture and painting.

The present paper aims at discussing the continuity of Vedic concept of dancing Indra (*nṛtu*) in Jain tradition and thereby in Jain art. It is important to note that Indra, also called Śakra and Devendra, is intimately associated with the Jinās (highest in Jain worship) and invariably makes his appearance before the Jinās or Tīrhaṅkaras on the occasions of all the five principal auspicious events (*pañchakalyāṇakas*) related to their lives, namely the conception, birth, initiation, attainment of *kevalajñāna* and first sermon after *kaivalya* in *Samavasaraṇa* (congregation hall), and salvation (*nirvāṇa*). Apparently the popularity of Indra was pronounced in Jain tradition which retained the *Vedic* character of Indra as Supreme dancer.

The importance attributed to the art of dance in Jain context is clearly revealed by the contents of the Jain *Purāṇas* which deal at length with the subject. In the Jain *Mahāpurāṇa*⁷ (9th century C.E.) various types of dances are mentioned which are mainly performed by Indra and the *apsarases* (*Nīlāñjanā*)⁸. Indra is believed to celebrate the birth of the Jinās with thirty-two types of dance⁹ and to have also enacted different dances along with the *apsarases* on occasion of R̥ṣabhadeva's birth¹⁰. In the Jain text some specific dance performances are also attributed to Indra. In the *Ādipurāṇa* he is said to dance *ānanda-nṛtya*¹¹ in the musical accompaniment of the *gandharvas*. This dance expresses *śṛṅgār-rasa* and was performed also by group of female dancers during the medieval period¹², thus revealing its popularity in the contemporary society. In the *Mahāpurāṇa*, another dance of Indra, *tāṇḍava-nṛtya*, is also mentioned which is usually associated with Śiva in Brahmanical context¹³.

The references to dance of celestials, especially Indra and the *apsarases*, in the Jain text find visual representation in the sculptures and paintings at the Jain sites of Indian subcontinent like Ellorā (cave 32 Indra sabhā, 9th century C.E.), Khajurāho (Śāntinātha temple complex, 11th century C.E.), Mount Ābū (Vimala Vasahī, circa 1150 C.E.) and Kumbhāriyā (Śāntinātha and Mahāvīra temples, 11th century C.E. and Neminātha temple, 12th century).

Ellorā, in Aurangabad district of Maharashtra, besides the famous Brahmanical caves and rock-cut sculptures, has also five Jain caves (cave nos. 30-34), the most important being cave 32 which is commonly known as Indra Sabhā. Cave 32, besides several rock-cut images of Pārśvanātha Jina and Bāhubalī, also contains paintings mostly in the ceilings. It has yielded approximately thirty-four paintings which are in bad state of preservation. These paintings are unique from the point of view of history of Jain painting as well as Jain

religion. The paintings show a distinct artistic sensibility comparable to the earlier paintings of Ajantā. Inspiring force for the sculptures and paintings found mainly in cave 32 at Ellorā was undoubtedly the phase of efflorescence which Jainism knew during the period of Rāṣṭrakūṭa ruler Amoghavarṣa (9th century C.E.) as demonstrated not only by the personal leaning of the king towards Jainism, but also by the composition of Jaina texts like *Ādipurāṇa* and *Uttarapurāṇa* during his rule. Of the surviving paintings, the paintings of Bāhubali standing in *kāyotsarga* with entwining creepers and eight-armed figure of dancing Indra are most important ones. Due to the central position of the beautiful figure of dancing Indra in the ceiling, the entire Jaina temple complex came to be known as Indra Sabhā. The dance of Indra holding his distinct attribute, the *vajra* and wearing *mukuta*, in its rhythm, movement, posture and gestures at once reminds of the earlier 8th century C.E. rock-cut sculptures of dancing Śiva in Kailāśa temple¹⁴ at Ellorā.¹⁴

Another representation of dancing Indra is carved on the rear wall of the group of shrines in the Śāntinātha Jaina temple complex at Khajurāho. Besides holding the distinctive attributes *vajra* and *aṅkuśa* (elephant goad), the hands of Indra are shown in different dance gestures¹⁵.

Several examples of *nṛttamūrtis* of Indra are found at the Jaina sites of the western regions, namely Kumbhāriyā (Gujarat) and Mount Ābū (Rajasthan). A sculpture in the Śāntinātha temple, Kumbhāriyā may be identified as Indra mainly because of the presence of his vehicle, the elephant, in lower right hand of the figure (fig.1). The importance of the figure is apparent on account of iconographic details like the *karanda mukuta* and other usual ornaments, as well as structural elements like the framing pilasters and *makara toraṇa*. The figure is four-armed : the lower right hand, as observed above, is engaged in holding the *vajra*, whereas the other three display distinctive dance gestures. The two main arms are naturally extended outwards, completely bent at the elbows and hand sbrought back on the chest. A similar disposition of the arms is seen in the *sama* attitude of modern *kathak* dance, the gestures enacted with the hands are however different. The main hands of the sculpture display *sarpaśīrṣa* with upward palm and a variant of *mayūra hasta*. The ring finger of the *mayūra* hand seems to touch the other hand as if picking up something that is held in its palm. *Sarpaśīrṣa hasta* indicates applying of *chandan* (sandal)¹⁶, whereas *mayūra hasta* denotes marking of *tilak* (auspicious mark)¹⁷. Perhaps Indra has been captured while miming the act of applying an auspicious mark by means of dance. The dance disposition of the main hands become relevant keeping in view the role of Indra on the occasion of the auspicious events related to the life of the Jinas. The upper left hand is lifted up in a graceful gesture and

perfectly balances the downward movement of the lower right hand. Both the legs are bent at the knees, the left foot is placed in *sama* on the ground, whereas the right one is slightly raised up. It is interesting to note the particular disposition of the toes of the lifted foot which calls for comparison with the *aṅguliprsthaga pāda* as defined in the later manuals on dance¹⁸. This dancing step, which in all probability was derived from the *agratalasañchara* or *kuñchita pādas* of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, is commonly seen in the dancing sculptures from Northern India belonging to the 10th-11th century C.E. The turning of the head of the figure, the deflection of the hips and the attitude of the legs suggests that Indra has been represented in a phase of gyratory movement.

The most forceful representation of ten-armed dancing Indra is carved in the ceiling of Vimala Vasahī (fig. 2). The dimension of the *nṛttamūrti*, the two flanking male figures playing on drums and the two flanking fly-whisk bearing female attendants indicate the importance of the dance image and the high status of Indra as the god of dance in Jaina tradition. The profuseness of ornaments like the *karanda mukuta* and other decorations, and the body contour, suggestive of the dancing movement and rhythm, are superb. The blooming face and the drooping eyes are expressive of the deep engrossment of Indra in dance which makes him truly the Supreme Dancer of *Vedic* tradition. Indra, besides his distinct attributes the goad and thunderbolt (half broken), holds cymbals (in two hands) and spiral lotus. His three surviving hands instead evince dance gestures which somehow rhythmically correspond to the movement of the two legs. The uplifted left hand displays a variation of *tripatāka hasta*¹⁹, a gesture which is associated with the figure of Indra in the *Abhinaya Darpaṇa*²⁰. Of the other two right hands, one is leisurely extended to the side in *latā* whereas the other points downwards in *patāka hasta*, a gesture which is defined in the *Śilpaśāstras* as *varada mudrā*, the wish fulfilling gesture. The adherence, in the rendering of the hands of the *nṛttamūrti*, to the dictates of the dance treatises is so pronounced that even the hands holding the emblems of Indra are represented in the enactment of graceful gestures, namely *kaṭakāmukha hasta*. Both the legs are bent at the knees and the feet are in contact with the ground. The uplifted big toe of the left foot, which is put a little ahead in respect of the other, indicates that the image is not represented in a static posture, but in the act of moving forward. The fact that it is not a normal walk, but the stylised gait of a dancer, is alluded by the deflection of the hips, swinging rhythmically from side to side. It is interesting to notice that the left foot of Indra apparently shows *ghūnghar*, the string of bells.

The above survey of the *nṛttamūrtis* of Indra demonstrates that the dancing aspect of the god was prominent in Jaina tradition and art. The early concept of dancing Indra went lost in

Brahmanical tradition wherein the functions of Supreme Dancer have completely fused into the figure of dancing Śiva. The *Vedic* Indra *nṛtu* thus became dancing Śiva of the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas*. The continuity in Jaina tradition of the *Vedic* character of Indra as Supreme Dancer is a unique example of the flow of *Vedic* tradition into the subsequent Jaina tradition which constitutes an interesting evidence of mutuality and interaction taking the entire study beyond the limits of sectarian or cultic threshold.

References

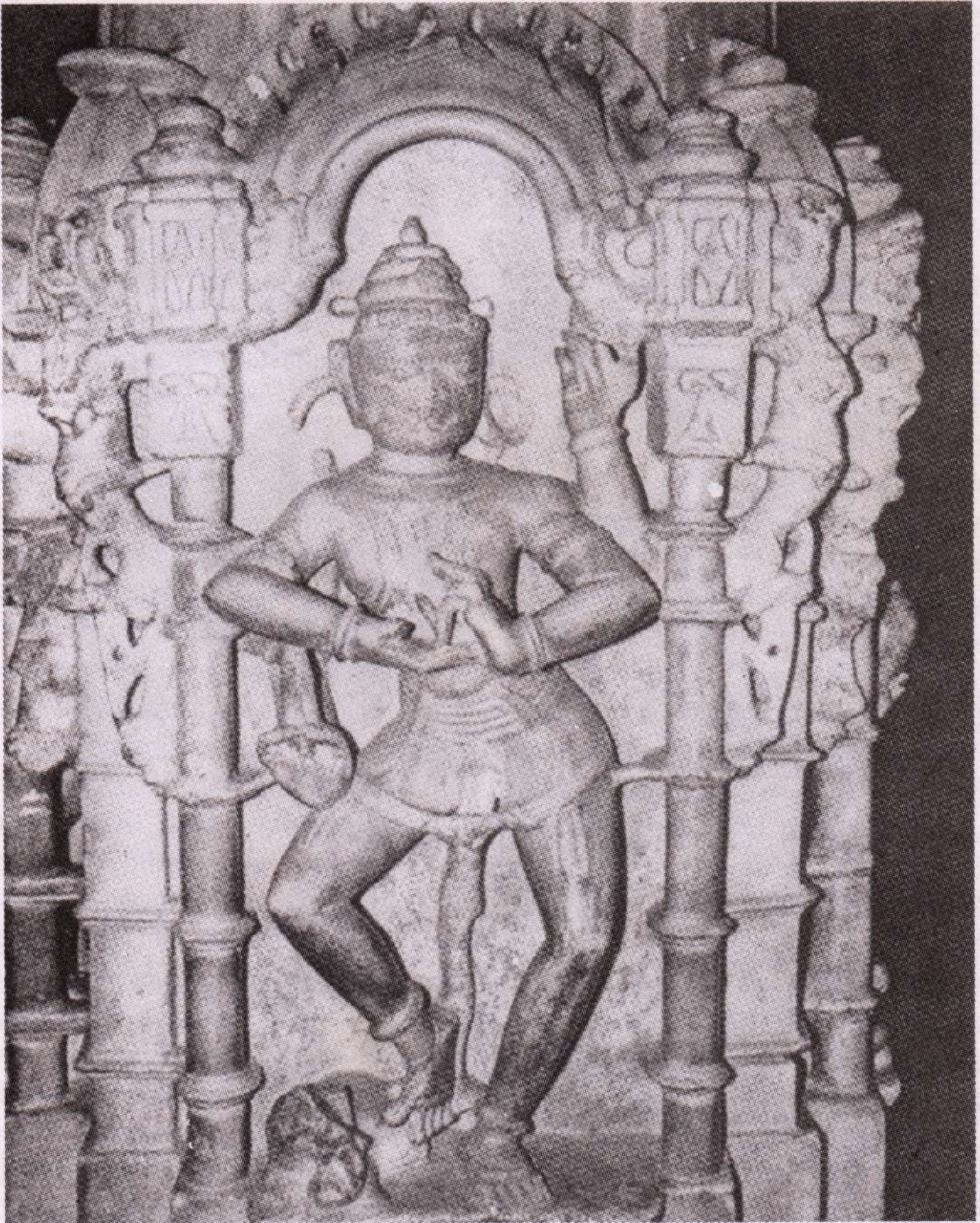
1. The dance of Siva is the subject of various works; A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Siva*, Delhi, 1991 (rep.); C. Sivaramamurti, *Natarāja in Art, Thought and Literature*, Delhi, 1974; Anne-Merie Gaston, *Śiva in Dance, Myth and Iconography*, Delhi, 1982; V.S. Agrawala, *Śiva mahādeva : the Great God*, Varanasi, 1984, (2nd edition); P. Banerji, *Natrāja : The Dancing God*, New Delhi, 1985.
2. *Ṛgveda*, I, 130, vii.
3. *Ṛgveda*, II, 22, iv.
4. *Ṛgveda* VIII, 24, ix.
5. *Ātharvaveda*, III, 3.
6. As suggested by Prof. M. N. P. Tiwari
7. The Jainā *Mahāpurāṇa* comprises 19207 verses (*śloka*s) of which 11429 verses are known as *Ādipurāṇa* and the remaining 7778 as *Uttarapurāṇa* composed respectively by Jinasena and Gunabhadra.
8. *Ādipurāṇa*, 17. 5-201.
9. *Ādipurāṇa*, 13 and 14.
10. *Ādipurāṇa*, 14. 103-154 and *Uttarapurāṇa*, 50.23-24.
11. *Ādipurāṇa*, 14. 157-158.
12. Kumud Giri, *Jaina Mahāpurāṇa : Kalāparaka Adhyayana*, Varanasi, 1995, p. 238.
13. *Ādipurāṇa*, 14.133 and *Uttarapurāṇa*, 50.34.
14. Information provided by my Ph.d. Supervisor, Prof. M.N.P. Tiwari, Dept. of History of Art, Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Abhinaya Darpaṇa*, 138.
17. *Abhinaya Darpaṇa*, 109.
18. *Nṛttaratnāvalī*, 2, 336b. The *Prṣṭhottanatalā deśī sthānaka*, the *paravṛttatala* and the *talodvṛtta deśī chārīs* described in the *Mānasollāsa* also involve the use of *aṅgulipṛsthaga* foot (*Mānasollāsa*, 16, 4, 1321, 1347b* 1348a and 1353b-1354a)

19. In *tripatāka hasta* the little finger should be extended, in the image instead it is kept a little bent.
20. *Abhinaya Darpaṇa*, 211. Two *tripatāka* hands crossed in *svastika* are prescribed to represent Śakra-Indra

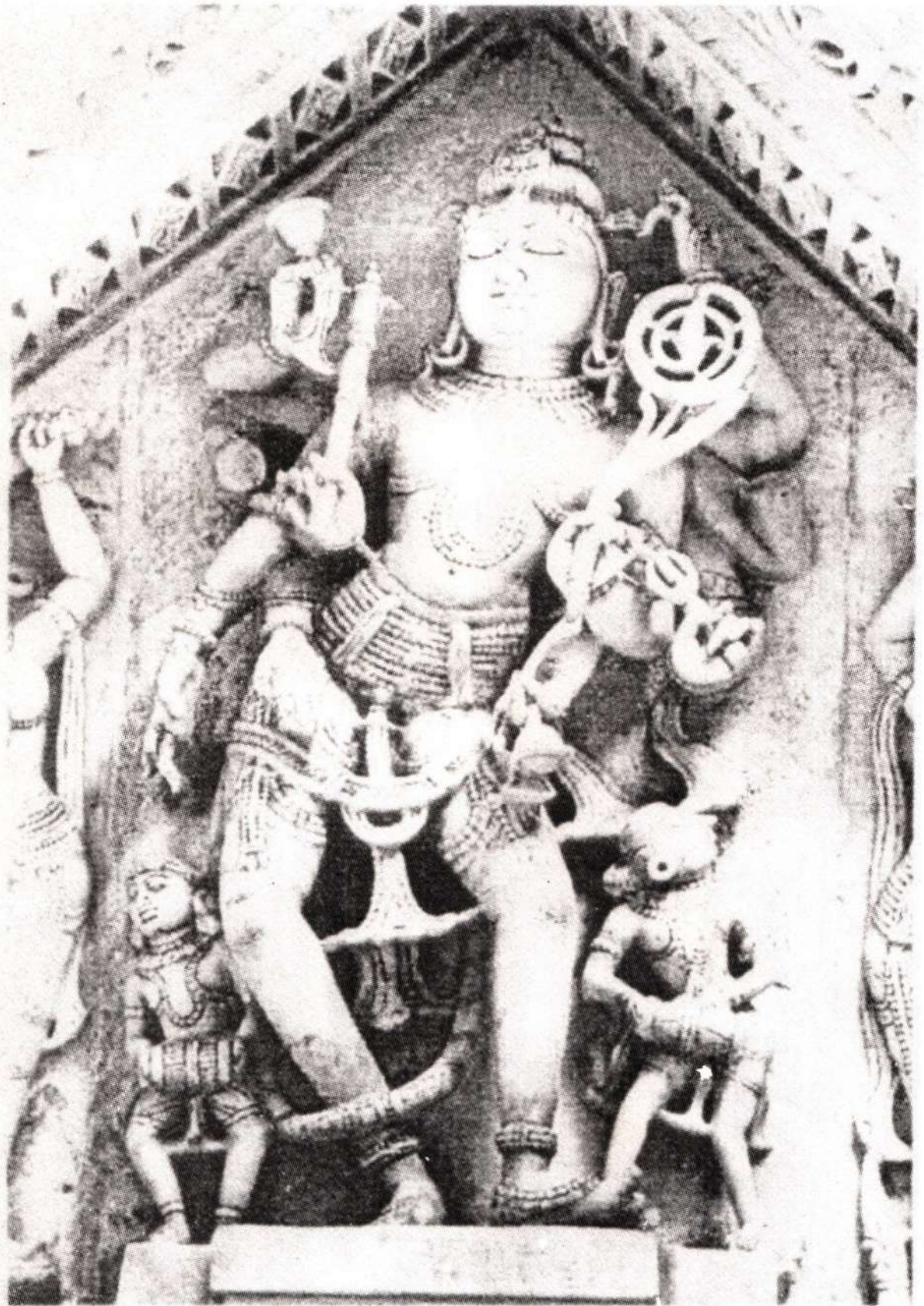
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1. Dancing Indra, Śāntinātha temple, Kumbhāriyā, 11th century C.E.
(Photo courtesy, Prof. M. N. P. Tiwari)



2. Dancing Indra, Vimala Vasahi, Mount Abu (Rajasthan), 1150 C.E.
(Photo courtesy, Prof. M.N.P. Tiwari)