Response to the “Endocrinology and the arts at the feet of the dancing Lord: Parathyroid hormone resistance in an Indian icon”

Citation

Published Version
http://www.ijem.in/temp/IndianJEndocrMetab185741-4919527_133955.pdf

Permanent link
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:23792576

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Accessibility
Response to the “Endocrinology and the arts at the feet of the dancing Lord: Parathyroid hormone resistance in an Indian icon”

Sir,

Dr. Seshadri’s article on Apasmara in the religious image of Nataraja, Lord of dance, is interesting. Though there have been several publications on the image of Nataraja, since it was first studied by Coomaraswamy, there have not been any scientific publications focusing on the dwarf devil, Apasmara. Hence, Seshadri’s article is an important publication in this newly emerging field of “Religious art and Science.” However, basing our conclusions solely on the visual inspection of one particular art work and also without incorporating the theological concepts into scientific analysis may be an unscholarly approach to develop a new field. Correlating the images of Apasmara in different Nataraja images would have been helpful; readers may find a “normal-looking,” i.e. lacking hypothyroid or any neurological stigmata, Apasmara in the image of Nallur Nataraja created by artists of Chola dynasty [Figures 1 and 2] who also had created the Chidambaram Nataraja image that Dr. Seshadri refers.

Scientific study of religious art should include theological, literary, socio-cultural, and historical viewpoints apart from visual inspection of the art. Dr. Seshadri’s article provides enough mythological/literary background of this image of Nataraja and Apasmara but fails to incorporate various other angles of scholarly study. Theological studies related to the story of Nataraja reveal that the dwarf-devil, Apasmara, was a mental concoction of ignorant sages who had forgotten that their spiritual powers were because of the grace of Lord Shiva himself. There is no indication in scriptural literature that the Lord had to subdue a disabled or crippled being, rather, the devil Apasmara may be considered as a symbolical, artistic representation of spiritual weakness/“dwarfism” that the sages had demonstrated towards Lord Shiva, because of their growing arrogance and/or ignorance. One may note that the synonyms of the word Apasmara, in Sanskrit, include mental derangements such as forgetfulness or loss of memory (apami smara = remembrance), confusion of mind and Epilepsy (http://www.spokensanskrit.de/).

Hence, apasmara can be found as a symptom in various neuropsychiatric disorders and even among clinically “normal” individuals. Historically, many of the temples of the Chola period had also functioned as mental health centers and one may only speculate about the use of dance as a therapeutic tool by ancient Ayurvedic/Siddha physicians in those temples. While socio-culturally, all the varieties of dances around the world, including Bharatanatyam in our context, have been used for entertainment and mood elevation, modern researchers have started to use dance as body-mind exercises in treatment programs for neuropsychiatric disorders.

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Access this article online
Quick Response Code:
Website: www.ijem.in
DOI: 10.4103/2230-8210.139225

Author Reply

Sir,

I am grateful for the valuable comments in the letter on Apasmara’s illness. It is gratifying to note that the column has found an erudite audience that critically reviews it. It is with this fulfilling feeling that I venture to reply to the learned correspondent.

The real Apasmara is indeed the ignorance of the sages of the Daruka forest (and indeed the forests in our hearts). However, the purpose of the column is to look beyond the theology and explore an endocrine meaning to the art.

It is true that there are several interpretations of the Nataraja bronze, including the famous five poses in the five sabhas (halls) of which Chidambaram is the most famous. The poses of the Lord in each of these are different. The example that the correspondent quotes in Nallur, though not one of the five, is an exquisite example of craftsmanship. It may be noted that even in the Nallur sculpture, Apasmara is a dwarf, not a grotesque cretin that stares out from the other forms but an example of a proportional short stature nevertheless. The absence of even a grimace in the dwarf’s face is probably testimony to Nataraja’s exquisite dancing skills. I had chosen the Chidambaram Nataraja only because, while it may not be the first, it is certainly the most famous and the most sacred.

In Tamil as well as Sanskrit, in the times gone by, names were given based on a cause or reason (kaarna peyar). Thus, one finds references to koon pandian (because he had a hunch back).

or Krishna because he was dark.

While Apasmara may represent lesser neuropsychiatric manifestations, the Tamil term for Apasmara‑muyalagan (derived from muyalvali) points out to epilepsy as the disease behind the name.

The objective of this column is to provide an endocrine link to the art form. Congenital psuedohypoparathyroidism appears to be a reasonable fit to the Chidambaram and other Apasmaras that explains the whole constellation including neuropsychiatric manifestations.

I must hasten to add that art and sometimes even endocrine disease depend so much on the eye of the beholder. The eye does see what the mind wants it to.

Thank you once again for a stimulating letter that will help this column improve.

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