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

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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 ($apa =$ loss and $smara =$ 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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