

Nandi the Bull

There are animals that are deemed sacred in the Hindu tradition and deities to whom these animals are dear and connected to in worship. These animals are said to be the *vahanas* (vehicles), the means of travel for the gods and goddesses of the Hindu tradition (Wilkins 448). The *vahana* does not have just one sole purpose; aside from being a mode of transportation, many deities exalt their *vahana* to the level of protector or disciple. One *vahana* of prolific stature is that of Nandi [or sometime referred to as Nandin or Nandiksvara] the mount of lord Siva [The Destroyer deity]. Nandi is described as a white *vr̥sa* (bull), having a large notable hump and tall horns. Worship of the bull can be dated as far back as the days of the Indus Valley Civilization, some 5,000 years ago (Murthy 1). This particular bull is widely known and worshipped alongside Siva as a result of the latter exalting Nandi to the position of *ganapati* (leader of the *ganas* (a body of followers)), his main companion, his foremost sectary and most notably as his *vahana* (Chakravarti 103). Nandi is also evidently known as the doorkeeper of Siva. There are many instances of which describe the regular intimacy of Siva and Parvati (female consort of Siva) on Mount Kailasa, as it is believed that when the two deities wed they made love for a hundred celestial years. There are many variations to this episode depending on the narration, yet Nandi is ubiquitous in the motif of interruption. Nandi is the gatekeeper who deters others from interrupting the deities' intimacy. Although through many depictions of the story, Nandi is eluded by the unexpected guests, thus the two deities are interrupted (see O'Flaherty 290-310). To this day a temple of Siva is not without a statue of Nandi facing the *linga* (phallus) in worship; illustrating the role of the gatekeeper. One of the more notorious known forms of Mahadeva (epithet of Siva) is that of Nataraja (Lord of Dance). It said that

Nandi is a skilled musician and provides the music for Nataraja to perform the cosmic dance of destruction (Turner 335).

Many stories exist about the introduction of Nandi into the Hindu tradition. A few of the more well known depictions are as follows: In the *Sivapurana* it is explained that Nandiksvara is the son of the rsi Salankytana. Visnu [The Preserver of the cosmos] is impressed by the rsi's pious meditations and grants him a boon [a wish]; that boon being a son, Nandiksvara almost instantaneously emerges out of the right side of Visnu. In the *Mahabharata* we hear another depiction of how Nandi became associated with Siva and the worship thereof. It is explained that Daksa Prajapati (an ancient creator god; a son of Brahma) offered the bull to Siva in an attempt to please him and in time Siva appointed Nandi as his *vahana*. It is also within this epic that Nandi is portrayed as his bull-faced human form of which he is known as Nandiksvara. The *Skandapurana* [one of the 18 puranas; devoted mainly to the life of Skanda/Muruga] describes Nandi's origin as a transformation from Dharma [as a deity in this context]. Upon being asked for a boon, Dharma promises to take on the form of a bull and become the *vahana* of Siva. The *Lingapurana* and *Kurmapurana* depict how Siva was born as Nandi; being upset about the finite life of a bull he meditates upon Siva. After pious meditation the deity appears and grants Nandi immortality alongside the role as leader of his *ganas* (Chakravarti 102-105).

There is extensive symbolism associated with Nandi in the Hindu tradition and in some instances he projects exactly that of Siva. "Nandi conveys Siva in every sense for not only is he the conveyance of the god, but he conveys the presence of Siva and stands for Siva himself [sic]" (Sunderland 1). Anna L. Dallapiccola, author of the *Dictionary of Hindu Lore and Legend*, explains that Nandi on one hand symbolizes *dharma* and on the other hand virility, fertility and strength (Dallapiccola). As stated in the *Skandapurana*, it was Dharma that assumed the form of

Nandi, which favors the idea of Nandi representing Dharma, emerging as Siva's lifelong attendant of righteousness. The bull is generally deemed an adequate representation of the potent force of man because of the strength and sexual virility it possesses. The bull personifies fertility, of which in Hindu tradition takes manifestation through many forms of *devi* (female aspect of the divine: goddess), including Parvati (Chakravarti 94). A story arises about the two sons of Siva and Parvati; Vetala and Bhairava [born of Taravati and Candrasekhara, avatars of Parvati and Siva respectfully] of whom have not fathered any sons yet. It is Nandi who advises the two sons to procreate, as he implies their lack of sons is not appropriate (O'Flaherty 70). Thus the promotion of procreation by Nandi helps to confirm the association of fertility with him. “Mythologically the god's vehicle and attendant, the bull is, in the eyes of the students of history, a theriomorph duplicate manifestation or representation of the fertility and procreation aspect of Siva's nature and energy [sic]” (Gonda 76). The idea that the bull generally roams the earth looking to procreate and satisfy its sexual impulses, speaks to the representation of fertility through the bull. Riding on the hump of the bull suggests the notion that Siva has mastered his sexual urges and brought them under control. It is often said only those who have mastered their impulses may ride atop the bull. The bull is often portrayed in images with a very robust frame and a loud roar. The roar of Nandi is said to be a symbol of Siva's roaring vitality (Chakravarti 97).

Images and statues of Nandi are found in all temples dedicated to Lord Siva. Upon entering a Siva temple one will pass through the *mandapa* (pavilion preceding the temple) of where Nandi is found, usually squatting on a platform facing the Sivalinga (prevalent icon of Siva; *linga*) in admiration of his symbolic form (Chakravarti 101). The largest statue of Nandi resides in the Nandi Mandapa of a Vijayanagara temple in Andhra Pradesh. The importance and elevated

stature of Nandi is evident through the numerous uses of his image. Nandi was known to grace many different coins; one in particular being the Ujjayini (now known as Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh) coin of which Nandi is seen gazing up at his lord (Chakravarti 100). It was as far back as 400 BC that Nandi even graced punch-marked coins of other traditions. The Kushanas [a tribe from China, arrived 100 AD] of India minted gold coins with Nandi and Mahadeva on them. There are also many sites within the subcontinent that have been named after Nandi. Within the Chikkaballapur district there is a village titled Nandi. Nandigramma is the place where Bharata is said to have laid down the slippers of Rama and worshipped them as he awaited his return from exile; as illustrated in the *Ramayana* (Murthy 2). An interesting ritual of which often still takes place today at the funerals of Saivas [worshippers of Siva], is the release of a bull(s). The bulls are let loose by pious friends of the deceased, said to wander and eventually find themselves in the presence of Siva. The release of the bulls is meant to represent a gift to Siva as he found great delight in his sacred bull, Nandi (Wilkins 277).

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