

ABSTRACT

Research Theme: Bhairava: Iconography of Shiva Iconography of the Terrible Form of Shiva in South India

Karine LADRECH, University of Paris 4, France

The Hindu God Shiva is an ambivalent divinity, benevolent at one time and then fearsome at another, adopting terrifying forms in his destructive function. One of such wild forms has been given an exceptional importance in Indian sculpture. It is called Bhairava "the horrifying one" which is doubtlessly the most violent and "impure" manifestation of Siva as it is closely linked to the myth of the decapitation of Brahma, the Creator in the divine Hindu triad (trimurti).

This manifestation of Siva has induced a huge variety of iconographical types. The Indian sculptures of Bhairava show him turn by turn as an untouchable mendicant moving from place to place for his penance or as a glorious god with an aura, surrounded by followers. He can take the appearance of a monster deformed and frightening, dancing in frenzy on the cremation grounds, brandishing many arms of destruction, or looking young and attractive, or skeletal, incarnation of Time and Death. Some images emphasize the transcendence of this sinful god, showing him as an image of Deliverance to whom everyone aspires. Many others relegate him to a fearsome guardian, as a Ksetrapala "guardian of territory" in the temples or in village borders. He is sometimes, in this role of protecting guardian, repeated in eight Bhairava.

One can ask why this particular form of Siva has generated so many varied representations. The complex figure of Bhairava, associated to concepts of sin and death, with an extraordinary iconographic and conceptual wealth, has given rise to numerous interrogations and calls for a deep study of faces that Indian artists have given him.

This database offers a vast panorama of images of Bhairava in South India and establishes to what extent certain iconographic particularities are linked to geographical areas, dynasties, and enables the user to see the numerical proportion of images by state, by district etc.