Misreading the Mendicant: A Textual and Iconography Reassessment of Shiva's Image at Lepakshi Natyamandapa.

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Abstract

The standing Shiva figure in the Natyamandapa of the Veerabhadra temple at Lepakshi has long been labelled Bhikshatana Shiva in popular and secondary literature. This label, however, has largely been repeated without systematic iconographic verification. This paper re-examines the sculpture through close visual reading of its attributes, posture, ornamentation, accompanying figures and spatial setting, and finds that these features diverge from the canonical characteristics of Bhikshatanamurti, such as the nude wandering mendicant, the begging bowl, the deer, and the attendant dwarfs (ganas). The study argues that the figure instead corresponds to another dancing form of Shiva. Rather than relying on earlier popular writing, the research places the sculpture in direct dialogue with primary iconographic sources, including the Agamas, Shilpashastra treatises and Vijayanagara-period textual traditions, matching each visual detail against prescribed descriptions. This text-image comparison yields a revised identification and shows how iconographic labels can become fixed through repetition rather than evidence. The paper also considers how the Natyamandapa's performative function and its association with dance traditions may shape the choice of form depicted. By foregrounding primary texts over inherited narratives, the study offers a methodological model for iconography research on Indian temple sculpture. It contributes to wider debates on how identifications are made, challenged and revised in Indian art history, and encourages similar re-evaluation of other widely accepted but poorly examined labels in South Indian temple art.

Keywords: Iconography, Lepakshi, Bhikshatana Shiva, Natyamandapa, Vijayanagara art, Agamas, Temple sculpture, Iconographic identification, Indian art history

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The Veerabhadra temple at Lepakshi, built in the first half of the sixteenth century under Vijayanagara patronage of king Achyutaraya[1], is known for its painted ceilings, monolithic Nandi and richly sculpted pillars. Its Natyamandapa, a hall for dance and ritual performance, holds some of the most admired figural carving of late Vijayanagara art. Among these is a standing Shiva with a bowl that guides, scholars and secondary writers have commonly called Bhikshatana Shiva, the wandering mendicant. The label appears in popular accounts, literature and general surveys, usually with no explanation of how it was reached.

[1] According to hunumanta rao Virupanna, a royal officer in the personal staff of Achyutaraya king ruled Lepakshi in the 16th century. pp.1

Bhikshatanamurti is among the best-defined forms of Shiva in South Indian iconography taken from sivas mahesamurtham form, which means manifestations of shiva. In the canonical account, Shiva wanders the Daruka forest as a naked beggar, bearing a skull-bowl or begging bowl. A deer, ornaments such as serpents, and attendant dwarfish ganas accompany him, and the form is tied to the narrative of the sages and their wives. These are not incidental details. Together they make up the lakshana by which the Agamas and Puranas treatises distinguish this form from others. When a sculpture is named Bhikshatana, those markers should be visible in the stone. At Lepakshi, as this paper shows, they largely are not.

D Hanumantha Rao identifies the Natyamandapa pillar standing shiva figure as Bhikshatanamurti, one of the unique forms Shiva assumes to expiate the sin of severing Brahma's head.[2] He describes a four-armed figure set within a makara-torana frame in a moving pose. The upper hands hold a damaru and a trisula resting across the shoulder. The lower right hand touches the mouth of an antelope, and the lower left holds a kapala. The figure wears a high jatamakuta with locks falling to the knees, Surya and Chandra flank the head, the right leg is bent (kunchita), and a bell chain is tied below the right knee. On the figure's left stands a dwarf attendant, named Kundodara, carrying a filled begging bowl, while a rishipatni serves alms with a ladle.[3] Rao also records a second Bhikshatana relief, on the granite boulder behind the linga in the Papanasesvara shrine, and treats the two as alike in detail.[4]

This paper therefore asks a simple but neglected question: on what evidence does the Bhikshatana identification rest? It sets aside earlier labels and reads the sculpture directly, examining its posture, attributes, ornamentation, shows where the figure departs from Bhikshatanamurti and where it matches another dancing form of Shiva, Kankalamurthi. accompanying figures and architectural setting. Each feature is then checked against the prescribed

[2] D. Hanumantha Rao, Lepakshi temple, a cultural and architectural study, Deccan College post graduate and research institute, 1985], pp. 108–109.
[3] Ibid., p. 109. Rao's term for the bell chain is garble
[4] Ibid., p. 108. Rao cites Pl. VI, A for the pillar figure.

dhyana and lakshana in the Agamas, purana treatises and Vijayanagara-period textual traditions. This text-to-image comparison

Figure: 1. Wandering Shiva, 16th Century, Lepakshi Temple, Vijayanagara, Photograph by the author, 2025.

The argument has two parts. The first is a correction to the record for one important sculpture. The second concerns the method. A label that is repeated often enough can begin to pass as established fact, and in Indian art history this is a particular risk where secondary sources copy one another and primary texts go unconsulted. By putting textual evidence ahead of inherited narrative, the paper offers a model for iconographic work that can be applied elsewhere.



The paper also asks why this form appears in this place. A Natyamandapa is built for dance, and the choice of a dancing aspect of Shiva for such a hall is unlikely to be arbitrary. The relationship between sculptural programme, architectural function and performance traditions is therefore considered as a possible reason for the form depicted.

The wandering Shiva carved on a pillar of the Natyamandapa at Lepakshi, and repeated without change in panel B1, scene five, has usually been labelled Bhikshatana Murti by George Michell, Dallapiccola and Rao, the other two scholars mostly relied on Rao's thesis. Closer iconographic reading, however, does not support this label. The well-known Bhikshatana images, such as the 12th-century bronze in the Nayaka Palace Art Museum, Thanjavur, and the principal forms at the Annamalaiyar Temple, Thiruvannamalai, and the Brihadeshwara Temple, Thanjavur, show a nude god with his genitals visible.

The Lepakshi figure, in both sculpture and painting, is clothed in a tiger-skin lower garment with additional cloth pieces falling at either side. He wears sandals, steps forward with one leg slightly bent, and carries a Kankala Danda vertically over his upper right shoulder, an attribute absent from the nude Bhikshatana images. His hair is bound in a Jata Makuta rather than spreading out in four directions as in the Bhikshatana type, and he wears two different earrings, a Sanghatala and a Karnakundala, in the left and right ears. In his lower left hand he holds a vessel made from a skull (Kapala), in his upper left hand a trident, and with his lower right hand he offers a tuft of grass to a deer leaping toward him.

The accompanying figures complete the identification: a Bhuta gana balances a large pot on his head, the wives of the sages stand semi-nude in a line with ladles (Darvi)[5] raised to give alms, and two Rishis stand at the right, one with hands in Anjali mudra, while Shiva walks before the sage's consort to receive her offering. Taken together, the

[5] The Rauravagama specifies that the instrument used by the consort of the sage for submitting alms Kankala Murti is called a Darvi. Swaminathan, p.138.

clothed body, the Kankala Danda,[6] The Jata Makuta, the skull vessel, the deer and the almsgiving setting match the description of Kankala Murti and not Bhikshatana. This identification rests on the iconographic prescriptions of the Agama texts, rather than on the narrative accounts of the Shaiva Puranas or the eighteen Mahapuranas.

Although Lepakshi is popularly known as the Virabhadra temple, the complex is not centred on that deity alone. Within it stands another principal shrine dedicated to Shiva as Papanasheswara, worshipped in the form of a linga. Linga worship is a core feature of Agamic Shaiva practice, since the Agamas prescribe how the linga is installed, consecrated and ritually served. The presence of this shrine at the heart of the complex indicates that the temple was organised around Agamic worship, and not around a Virabhadra cult or Puranic narrative alone.

This Agamic foundation helps explain the character of Lepakshi's sculptures and paintings. If the temple's ritual life followed Agamic norms, the artists who decorated its pillars and ceilings would likely have worked within the same framework, using the iconographic rules the Agamas lay down for each form of Shiva. The Kankala Murti figure, with its clothed body, Kankala Danda, Jata Makuta and skull vessel, fits this pattern. The Agamic literature of Lepakshi should therefore be treated as a key to reading its imagery, and an identification based on Agamic prescription is more reliable than one based on the general Puranic story of the wandering mendicant Shiva.

The placement of Kankala Murti on a Natyamandapa pillar is meaningful, not incidental. The mandapa was a space for the ritual performance of dance and music in service of the deity, so an image of Shiva shown mid-stride, receiving alms from the sages' wives, fits it well. The scene presents Shiva as the supreme god who moves among people and accepts their offerings, which reinforces Shaiva devotion and helps spread the central ideas of the tradition to the worshippers and performers who gathered there. The image also belongs to the same visual world as the dancing figures and musicians with instruments carved on the neighbouring pillars. Kankala Shiva's bent-leg walking stance, the lifted arm offering grass to the deer, and the Bhuta gana and the almsgiving women arranged around him give the panel a dance-like rhythm. This suggests the sculptors drew on the posture and gesture conventions of the Natyashastra tradition, as they did for the dancers beside him. The Kankala Murti relief therefore joins Agamic iconography to perform aesthetics, presenting Shiva as both the object of worship and the model of graceful movement within the temple's dance hall.

This paper has re-examined the Shiva, wandering mendicant carved on a pillar of the Natyamandapa at Lepakshi, and finds that the long-repeated label of Bhikshatana Murti does not hold up against the evidence of the sculpture itself. Canonical Bhikshatana images, such as the bronze in the Nayaka Palace Art Museum, Thanjavur, and the principal forms at Thiruvannamalai and Thanjavur, show a nude wandering mendicant. The Lepakshi figure is clothed in a tiger-skin garment and wears sandals, a Jata Makuta and two different earrings (Sanghatala and Karnakundala). He carries a Kankala Danda over his right shoulder, holds a Kapala and a trident, and offers grass to a leaping deer. Around him are a Bhuta gana with a pot, the semi-nude wives of the sages with raised ladles (Darvi), and two Rishis. Matched against the Agamic prescriptions, these features correspond to Kankala Murti, not Bhikshatana. The identification rests on the Agamas rather than on the Puranic narrative of the wandering Shiva, and it applies equally to the repeated scene in panel B1.

[6] Kankalamurthi is an identical form of Bhikshatana Murti who wears clothing and carries a Kankala Danda in his upper right hand. The Silparatna text specifies that the Danda is to be positioned vertically on the shoulder, and it is identified as the Kankala Danda attribute. Swaminathan, pp. 137-138.

The Agamic reading is not arbitrary. The presence of the Papanasheswara linga shrine at the heart of the complex shows that Lepakshi was organised around Agamic Shaiva worship, not around the Virabhadra cult or Puranic story alone. Artists working in such a temple would have followed the Agamic rules for each form of Shiva, which makes Agamic prescription a more reliable key to the imagery than inherited popular labels.
The placement of Kankala Murti in the Natyamandapa also appears deliberate. The figure's bent-leg stride, lifted arm and the arrangement of the Bhuta gana and almsgiving women give the panel a dance-like rhythm, consistent with the posture and gesture conventions of the Natyashastra and with the dancers and musicians on neighbouring pillars. Shiva is thus shown both as the supreme deity who accepts offerings among his devotees and as the model of graceful movement within a hall devoted to performance.

The paper's significance is twofold. It corrects the record for one of Lepakshi's most admired sculptures, and it demonstrates a method: labels in Indian art history can become fixed through repetition when secondary sources copy one another and primary texts go unconsulted. By checking each visual detail against the dhyana and lakshana of the textual sources, iconographic identification can be tested rather than inherited. Other widely accepted but poorly examined labels in South Indian temple art deserve the same re-evaluation, and future work could extend this text-image approach to the second relief behind the linga in the Papanasesvara shrine and to comparable figures elsewhere in the Vijayanagara corpus.

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