



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

INFLUENTIAL REFERENCE TO DANCE IN TEMPLE SCULPTURE

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Abstract

Dance has been an essential part of everyday rituals of the temple from the 3rd century to the early 20th century. This led to the evolution of temple dancers, musicians, and courtesans proficient in the arts. During the 4th and 5th centuries, the performing arts integrated with the temple sculpture and the text on dance (*Natya Sastra*). Beautiful, elegant, flowing movements with heavy ornamentation had become an integral part of the temple architecture. The iconographic texts were the basis for the temple architecture and sculptures. Beauty and aesthetics remained the critical factor for the artists; they enjoyed the freedom to use their creativity in their work. This encouraged the artists to portray the element of beauty and expression of human emotions by evoking rasa. Hence, hundreds of sculptures show dance poses along with musicians and musical instruments.

Keywords

Sculpture, temple, architecture, Chennakesava, Hoysaleswara Belur, Badami Helebidu, traditional art, aradhamandi, artists, dance poses, musicians, and musical instruments

Introduction

Indian traditional art has its principles. The human body signifies the common medium of expression. The detailed reference to dance placed in the temples is illustrated briefly. Until the 19th century, art was patronised by royal courts. Whereas in the past, images of dancers in the performance are documented by monumental sculpture and murals. The temple sculptor could exercise his creativity in portraying a dance in the figure. They clearly showed the "aradhamandi" posture, hand gestures, the kind of clothes and ornaments they wore, and the musicians who accompanied them.

The classical dance in the temple and its royal patronage are inseparable. The Indian temples were the most crucial repository of dance performance, showing continuity in the performing tradition. Most royal courts were patrons of the significant temple architecture and sculpture in their kingdoms. The prominent temples had *natyamadapas* and *ranga mandapas* on their campus, where dance performances were held. These performances were a part of the religious rituals. People came to pray at the temple and could also see the performances, thus giving social sanction to the dance and the performers. Such continuous exposure provided ordinary people with knowledge and appreciation of the art.

Dance in sculpture

In India, the temple was the centre of all activities, be it cultural or political. Temple was an architectural delight, decorated with sculptures, paintings, and halls for music, dancing, and theatre. All arts came together to fulfil the aesthetic and devotional needs of the devotees. Thus, it worked as the institution of popular artistic culture. Temple became a prominent place for arts and worshipped God through song and dance. There were different kinds of temples based on their shapes, such as *Nagara*, *Dravida*, and *Vesara*. In the *Nagara*-temple style, the traditional *Sompura* communities were the architects and builders who followed the *Shilpa Shastra* and *Vishnudharmottara Purana*. In such temples, the lowest part was decorative, with carved images of flowers and animals, and the upper level portrayed human activity where dance found a significant place. Pillars often also had dancers and dance poses sculpted on them, and dance panels went all around the temple. Table 1 provides a list of a few temples from Karnataka having *Natyamandapa*-s.

Table 1: Temples with Natyamandapa

S.NO	Temple	Place	Sculpture
1	Badami	Badami	Wall panels of excellent quality sculptures.
2	Chennakesava	Belur	38 beautifully carved bracket figures. Four central pillars of the hall adorned with bracket figure looks like bejeweled dancing dance set.
3	Hoysaleswara	Halebid	At the bottom of the indented walls are six horizontal bands of relief sculptures of elephants, lions, swans, and stories from Ramayana and Mahabharathatha. Sculptures are about half life-size.

Dance documentation in sculpture

Most of dance's sculptural 'documentation' is found in temple architecture. The chief documentation of dance as prescribed in the *Natyashastra* and *Shilpashastra* was in the form of sculpture in the temples. Both disciplines elaborate on a correct and detailed knowledge of the human body, the bone structure, the joints and their flexibility, the muscular system, and the limbs. Sculptural imagery of dance is founded in stone, wood, metal, and terracotta in both classical and regional styles of depiction. Such sculptures have provided a perpetuation for dance and existed and developed at multiple levels. At Ellora and Mahabalipuram, the stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata are sculpted within the caves and rock formations.

The technique of dance in sculptures

Karnas in the temples signifies the direct association between dance and sculpture. Karnas is a unit of movement in dance; it is highly discussed with sophisticated details in the *Natyashastra*. Karnas is the coordination of the three essential aspects of the dance - *stanaka*, *chari*, and hand gesture. Bharatha has enumerated one hundred and eight Karnas and described them in detail. Each of the Karnas described in the *Natyashastra* has a specific distinctive feature. The Karana sculptures in the different temples of India are a frozen moment of movement. They are inspiring examples of the intelligence of the sculptors. In the Chidambaram temple, the Karnas are exquisitely carved on the walls with verses from *Natyashastra*. The Karnas in all the temple sculptures brings a sense of spiritual identification.

Dance performance through sculpture.

There are sculptural panels showing dancers in performances found in several temples. The sculpture in Khajuraho – shows one or two dancers accompanied by a group of musicians and can be identified through costume, jewellery, and hairstyles. The musicians hold musical instruments such as mridangam, veena, cymbals, flute, etc. The dance panels at Ellora cave 7 (Fig – 1) are focused on the dancing girl in the centre where the dancer in the "*dvibhanga*" poses in "*aramandi*". Both her hands are in Kataka mukha hasta. She is flanked on both sides by seated female musician figures. While one plays the flute and the other plays the drums, and the rest are given "Tala."



Fig – 1. Dance panels, Ellora cave 7

Many figures in the ChennaKesava Temple, Belur, are interpreted as dance postures (Fig – 2). One such image shows a female figure in a "*dvibhanga*" posture with her right leg crossing the left leg from the knees. The right foot is in "*parsvaga*" (SR, sh. 326), and the right hand is in *kapitha* (AD, sh.121) and holds something. Her eyes are in *avalokita Drishti* (AD, sh. 78). In most of the sculpted figures, the *caris*, *sthanakas* and the *karnas* can be quickly identified as described in the *Natyashastra*.

The famous *Kalia-daman* episode (fig.3) in Krishna's childhood stories seems to have been as popular with sculptors as present-day dancers. At the ChennaKesava temple in Belur, a dance panel portrays the triumphant Krishna dancing on the hood of the subdued *Kaliya Naga*. He is in the dance pose of "*tribhanga*", in *aindra sthana* (AD, sh. 278), where he stands on one leg bent

at the knee and the other leg and knee raised. The right hand is in *Abhaya-mudra*, and the left-hand holds the tail of the Naga. Two small figures flank him, each holding yak-tail fans, while the two more prominent figures are in *garuda sthana* (AD, sh. 280) with their hands folded in *Anjali-hasta* (AD, sh. 276).



Fig – 2. dance postures - ChennaKesava Temple, Belur

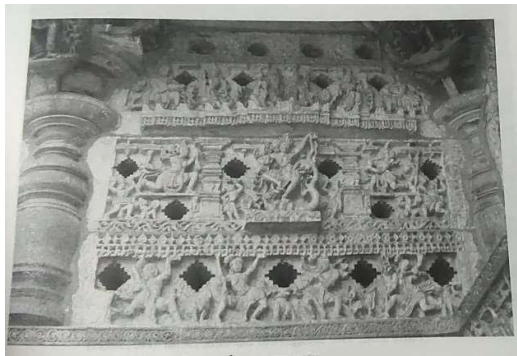


Fig – 3 Kalia-dama,
ChennaKesava temple, Belur



Fig – 4. Dancing Saraswati,
Hoysaleswara Temple,

An unusual icon is the Dancing Saraswati image from the Hoysaleswara Temple, Halebidu (fig – 4). She is seen in the *aindra sthana* (AD, sh. 278). She has four hands. One of the right hands appears to be in *musti* (AD, sh. 116-111), and the other is in *Abhaya mudra*. One of the left hands is in *Ardha Candra* (AD, sh.111). She is wearing numerous ornaments and very elaborate headgear. All the Swarupas of the Hindu gods and goddesses are also depicted, carved on the temple walls. The Indian classical dancer often shows these forms through stories in dance, such as the *Dashavatara* of Vishnu, Shiva in his various *Tandavas*, and so on. In the *Natyashastra*, the sculptors have also used similar techniques to depict multiple movements. For example, the *Vrscika Karana* (shloka 107, Karana 47) describes how in this Karana, the hands are bent toward the elevations of the shoulders and the right leg is bent towards the back and kept at some distance from it. The Mayura *Lalita Karana* (shloka 104, Karana 80) guides the dancer to make a *vriscika* of the leg, keep the hands in recital and turn the trika round and round.

Conclusion:

Traditional Indian sculptures followed the same rule for their creation; it is truly amazing to observe how such figures still convey a tremendous sense of release from the ground and the feeling of being airborne. The sculptors of those times had an exhaustive knowledge of *Natyashastra*, *Sangitha Ratnakara*, and text relating to performing arts. Understanding the classical dance form, the sculptors can perfectly portray various mudras and poses. The sculptures are well-maintained and nurtured in temples as part of a vibrant tradition. Classical dance in south India has remained over centuries as a dynamic, living tradition that is continually renewed.

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