



**Ālaya Nṛtta and its Significance**

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**Introduction**

The beautiful, towering ālaya (temples) of India are not mere structures of stone but monuments that have stood the test of time to tell us stories of our history, culture, tradition and heritage. These sacred spaces were a haven for the development of various art forms, especially dance (nṛtta) and music (gīta), as they were interwoven seamlessly into the ritualistic quotient of the ālaya proceedings. That nṛtta played a prominent role in the ālaya sampradaya (traditions) is well known. The karaṇa sculptures in some ālaya and the sculptures of various nṛtta postures in many ālaya-s are there not just to enhance the beauty and aesthetics but also to provide us with clues on the various nṛtta that were practiced then. Every aspect of the ālaya including architecture, consecration, rituals, philosophy, are governed by authoritative texts called āgamas. The prescriptions for nṛtta in the ritualistic tradition as mentioned in the āgamas is the focus of this paper. The purpose of this paper is to explore the exact specifications for the offering of nṛtya in the ālaya as given in select āgama-s. The terms nṛtta and nṛtya have been used synonymously in this paper.

The āgama-s are huge bodies of work and there are several that are still in the form of palm leaf manuscripts with restricted access. Many of them are in Grantha script and have not yet been published in Devanāgarī. These have not been pursued by the research scholar. Of the available and published āgama-s, the kāmikāgama, śrīpraśna saṃhitā have been taken for the study. The research methodology employed is both quantitative content analysis and qualitative analysis.

**Āgamas:**

The term āgama literally means tradition or "that which has come down". S K Ramachandra Rao, in his āgama encyclopedia says, "The āgama texts describe cosmology, epistemology, philosophical doctrines, precepts on meditation and practices, yoga, mantras, construction of the ālaya, deity worship and so on." In simple terms, the āgamas could be called as rule books or manuals for all ālaya related activities including rituals, process of worship, conduct of festivals and so on. The ālaya is a public institution and has to function everyday irrespective of the patronage it receives. The basis of what has to be done and the prescriptions of how it has to be performed form the core of the āgamas. It is believed that the āgamas have come down through the oral tradition for generations before being written down as texts. The pūjā performed in the ālaya is said to be parārthapūjā (pūjā done for the well-being of others) and is distinct from ātmārthapūjā (pūjā done for oneself).

There are three main schools of āgamas based on the deity consecrated according to text and traditions. They are

Śaiva āgamas

Vaishṇava āgamas

Śākta āgamas

The āgamas are generally divided into 4 pādas.

- Jñāna pāda - This pāda deals with the spiritual philosophy, knowledge of the self
- Yoga pāda - This pāda deals with the methods through which one can gain knowledge
- Kriyā pāda - This pāda deals with the construction of a temple, the conduct of a ritual, festival, procedures, ritual codes
- Caryā pāda - This pāda deals with the details on the various kinds of rituals and the methodology of conducting these rituals

The Kriyā pāda and the Caryā pāda of the āgamas are of specific interest for the purpose of this study, as they elaborate on the upacāras or offerings that have to be made to the deity as part of the nitya (everyday



or eternal) and the naimittika (occasional) ritualistic ceremonies. They also provide procedures for the conduct of various kinds of utsavas or festivals. The 'nityotsava' or daily festival is ordained to occur at various intervals during the day and/or as the concluding worship at the end of each day. The other kinds of utsavas include vārotsava (weekly festival), pakṣotsava (fortnightly festival), māsotsava (monthly festivals), ṛkṣotsava (festivals based on the star alignments), vasanthotsava (spring festival), ḍolotsava (swing festival) and so on. (Davis, 2010) The most popular of the utsava would be the mahotsava (the great festival) which is an elaborate festival lasting anywhere between one to over twenty-seven days depending on the ālaya. Most of the āgamas stipulate that nṛtta should be performed in the nitya pūjā in addition to the other kinds of festivals prescribed for the ālaya, particularly in the mahotsava. Specifications are also given in some āgamas on who had to perform the nṛtta, the essential qualities required and the prerequisites they needed to adhere to in order to be able to perform in front of the deity.

Nṛtya Upacāra during Nitya Pūjā:

Upacāras play a major and important role in worship of the deity. The kāmikāgama enlists the upacāras during nitya pūjā as<sup>1</sup> (Duraiswamy, 2021)

pādya	Washing His feet
ācamana	Offering water to drink
arghya	Offering of water
dūrvāpuṣpamakṣata	Offering of flowers, akṣata
snāna	Ritual bathing
vastra	Offering clothes
gandha vilepana	Offering fragrant pastes
kusuma	Offering fragrant flowers
dhūpa	Offering Incense
dīpa	Offering lamp
havis	Offering of food
tāmbula	Offering of betel nuts
mukhavāsa gandha	Offering of mouth freshners
gīta	Offering of songs
nṛtta	Offering of dance

<sup>1</sup> Pūrvakāmikāgame archanāvidhipaṭale

Snānam vastravilepanaṅ ca kusumaṅ dhūpo'tha dīpo havis  
tāmbulaṅ mukhavāsaṅ gandha sahitāṅ gītaṅ ca nṛttaṅ mahat | 4.374



bali	Offering for the protective deities
sa`gīta	Offering of music

The kāmikāgama mentions that the nitya pūjā from pādya to nṛtta should be completed within a sandhi to prevent doṣa. The sandhi is the meeting of two yāma periods. One yāma refers to a duration of three hours. There are three main sandhis called mahāsandhis (morning, afternoon and evening) and three smaller sandhis called upasandhi. The time specification for each of the upacārās during the mahāsandhi are mentioned as well. For instance, snāna is recommended for two ghaṭikās and nṛtta is for one ghaṭikā. (one ghaṭikā is equal to 24 minutes)<sup>2</sup> (Duraiswamy, 2021)

Based on the number of times and extent of the pūjā performed, the kāmikāgama categorizes it into nine types. Of the nine types, adhama-adhama, adhama-madhyama, adhama-uttama, madhyama-adhama, madhyama-madhyama, madhyama-uttama categories do not have any nṛtta component in them. Nṛtta is integral in the Uttama-adhama, Uttama-madhyama and Uttama-uttama types. The Uttama-adhama category is when pūjā performed includes śuddhanṛtta performed by thirty-four, twenty-four or ten beautiful and youthful gaṇikās in all three sandhis and are accompanied by the pañcācārya. The performance is prescribed for a duration of one yāma (3 hours)<sup>3</sup>. The uttama- madhyama category is when fifty gaṇikās perform for the deity in all three sandhis. The prescribed duration is two yāmas.<sup>4</sup> The Uttama-uttama category is when 216 gaṇikās perform for the deity in all three sandhis. The prescribed duration is one yāma.<sup>5</sup> (Duraiswamy, 2021) This goes on to show that nṛtta had a significant role in the highest categories of pūjā, uttama or best.

### Nṛtya Upacāra during Mahotsava:

The Śrīpraśna saṃhitā- a Vaishṇava āgama that comes under Pāñcarātra, mentions in great detail the tāla, gīta and the nṛtta to be performed during each day of the Mahotsava in the pātala (chapters) 30-35 dealing with Mahotsava vidhi. For instance, while invoking Garuda specifically during dvajārohanam (raising of the flag to indicate the commencement of the Mahotsava), the nṛtta to be performed is Vishṇukrāntam.<sup>6</sup>

While inviting the various divinity to the utsava and during Bali, the text specifies that nṛtta has to be performed to the accompaniment of musical instruments and singing.<sup>7</sup> The text then mentions the various Gods that have to be invoked and the nṛtta to be performed to please those Gods. For instance,

<sup>2</sup> Pūrvakāmikāgame archanāvidhipaṭale  
ghaṭikādvitayam snāne...

ghaṭikaikā tu nṛttārtham kāla eṣah prakīrtitaḥ | 5.8

<sup>3</sup> Pūrvakāmikāgame archanāvidhipaṭale

gaṇikās tu catustrimśat caturvimśati vā daśa  
rūpayauvana saṃpannāstrikālam nṛttam ācharet  
pañcācārya samāyuktām kālam yāma samanvitam | 4.391-392a

<sup>4</sup> Pūrvakāmikāgame archanāvidhipaṭale

vādhyakānām catustrimśat pañcāśadgaṇikānvitam  
kālam yāmadvayam proktaṃ nṛttam kuryāt trisandhiṣu | 4.395

<sup>5</sup> Pūrvakāmikāgame archanāvidhipaṭale

śoḍaśadvīśataiścaiva gaṇikābhis samanvitam  
nṛttam kuryāt trisandhyāyām kālo yāmayuto bhavet | 4.398

<sup>6</sup> Śrīpraśna saṃhitā, trayastrimśodyayah

Nṛttam ca viṣṇukrāntam udāhṛtam 33.71

<sup>7</sup> Śrīpraśna saṃhitā, catustrimśodyayah

gāyeyurnṛttayeyuśca devasya purato bhuvī 34.42



Vilāsam is performed to please Kumuda.<sup>8</sup> Kumudākṣa is pleased with the performance of Viṣṇukrāntam.<sup>9</sup> Nṛtta that pleases Puṇḍarīka (the one mounted on a horse, with large shoulders and with great strength) is said to be Ketakam.<sup>10</sup> In this manner, the nṛtta to be performed to venerate the Gods of each direction are also mentioned. In the 35<sup>th</sup> chapter, the prescriptions for procession of the main ceremonial idol (utsava bera) along with the various musical instruments that should be played, singing and nṛtta by nartaki are given as well. It says, Nartakīs showing abhinaya (of) a lot of rasas such as śṛṅgāra, etc., singing with melodious voices, (playing) all different (musical) instruments) should accompany the processions.<sup>11</sup>

## Gaṇikā and Rudragāṇikā

The āgamas refer to the nartaki as gaṇikā. In the Śaivāgamas they are sometimes also called rudragāṇikās. The kāmikāgama mentions that the nṛtta performed in front of the Lord is saukhyakarma. The details of what comes under saukhyakarma, who the people are who can execute this vidhi, their qualifications, etc. are dealt with in an entire chapter dedicated to saukhyakarma vidhi. After giving details of who the rudragāṇikās are, their dikṣa or initiation, the qualification for the pañcācāryas, who accompany the rudragāṇikās, are given as well. They are described as Śivabhaktas. The rudragāṇikās are ordained to perform śuddhanṛttam that is in accordance to Bharata's text (Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra).<sup>12</sup>

Gaṇikās as mentioned in the Śrīpraśna saṃhitā as young, beautiful maidens adorned in fine drapery and ornaments and should wear the puṇḍrika or the tirunāman. They should have been given the pañcasamṣkāra (the initiation in Śrīvaiṣṇavasampradāya) and should be filled with devotion.

## Conclusion:

Nṛtta was an integral part of the ālaya sampradāya. Many of the āgamas give specific details of what has to be performed, when and where it has to be performed. Similar to the role of the priests, the gaṇikās or the rudragāṇikās too had a role to play in the proceedings of the temple. The famous inscription in the Tañjāvūr Big temple enlisting the names of the nartakis who were employed by the temple administration and the emoluments received by them for their services, reiterates the importance that was given to ālaya nṛtta by the rulers of the time. One can only imagine the splendor and the grandeur of the ālaya rituals and processions of the yester years. Unfortunately, over a period of time, due to political, social and economic reasons, this has been lost. Today, though the ālayas stand tall, the maṇḍapas that once resounded with the anklets and bells worn by the dancer have been silenced. But the onus lies on us to understand the prominent position nṛtta and the gaṇikās held in the ālaya sampradāya and in the least acknowledge their contribution to the development of the art form.

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<sup>8</sup>Śrīpraśna saṃhitā, catuśtrimśodyayah

nṛttaṃ vilāsametaistaṃ kumudaṃ modayed rame 34.77

<sup>9</sup>Śrīpraśna saṃhitā, catuśtrimśodyayah

tālaṃ tu madhyamo nṛttaṃ viṣṇukrāntamihocyate 34.81

<sup>10</sup>Śrīpraśna saṃhitā, catuśtrimśodyayah

nṛttaṃ ketakamucyate| aśvārūḍha mahābāho puṇḍarīka mahābala | 34.84

<sup>11</sup> Śrīpraśna saṃhitā, pañcāśtrimśodyayah

nartakyo'bhinayantyo vai śṛṅgārādīrasān bahūn | gāyantyaḥ susvarāḥ sarvā vādyaiśca vividhairapi | 35.39

<sup>12</sup> tadeva śudha nṛttam tu lakshanaṃ bharatoditam 73.9



## PRANAV JOURNAL OF FINE ARTS

ISSN: 2582-9513

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