

“Modern Cultural Influences on Performing Arts and Fine Arts” Temples as cultural centers for dance forms

Dr. Sujatha Mohan,

**Assistant Professor, Dept. of Natya, Dr. MGR-Janaki College; Chennai;
Assistant Professor, Dept. of Bharatanatyam, University of Silicon Andhra; USA;
Research Supervisor, School of Music and Fine arts, Vels University, VISTAS;
Chennai;**

Abstract

The temples in India built by the kings have been providing a nucleus for the growth of various cultural activities. They were not just a place of worship but were a place for social gathering, education and celebration. Art and craft flourished and was encouraged in the temples. Performances in the form of music, dance, drama and handicrafts were held here. Thus, the artists acquired the opportunity to worship and present their homage to God and get remuneration from Kings. Inscriptions seen in the temples provide various details about the Kings being patrons of the art forms. This paper will deal with the cultural activities connected to the temples and the how the temples served as archeological sources for growth of music and dance in India.

Introduction

Bhakti period evolved around 7th century CE. Kings in India built many temples as the place of worship. They patronized the saint poets, musicians and composers in their courts. Dancers were employed in temples and the courts. The Kings were the patrons of art forms such as dance, drama and music. “Pallavas were among the earliest rulers of Tamilnadu and they are best known for their architectural wonders of Mahabalipuram and Kanchipuram. In the far south, the temple architecture began with the Pallavas. Many temples were constructed in honour of different Hindu Gods and goddesses under the royal patronage”. The Cholas were known for the temples in and around Thanjavur and kings of Vijayanagar Empire for the temples in Tamilnadu and Karnataka.

Practice of art forms in temples

Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa prescribes that each temple should have a theatre on its northern side. Theatre used to be an essential part of the architecture of temples. Most large temples have a hall meant for the performance and the audience to sit. They were known as the ‘*raṅga mahāl*’ ‘*nṛtta maṇḍapam*’, ‘*saṅgīta-śāla*’ and so on, for occasional sacrifices and dance recitals. This is also called the ‘*naṭa-mandirā*’ (hall for temple dancing) where, women dancers or *devadāsīs* used to perform dance rituals. The architectural beauty of these halls, the innate carvings of dance sculptures and the inscriptions found here tells us that dance performances were a regular feature in the temple.

Detailed description of staging a Sanskrit play, in a temple is found in the *Kuṭṭanīmata* an epic poem composed by Dāmodara towards the end of the eighth century. In an episode in this poem, the author gives a vivid description of the performance of Sri-Harṣa’s *Ratnāvali nāṭikā*. This performance was presented inside *Viśvanātha* temple of *Kāśī*. Dāmodara gives an extensive



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213

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account of how they were presented. The performances of *Yātrā* festivals in temples are noted down in various Sanskrit texts. *Jaina āgama*, describes about the *krīḍa gr̥ha* (playhouse) in Jain temples. *Narmadāsundarikatha*, a fascinating tale of *Prākṛit*, presents a picturesque account of the *Jinanātha Mahotsava* in a *Jaina* temple where dances and drama performances took place.

Temple sculptures as sources for practice of arts

Sculptures seen in and around India, in places like Sānchi, Mathurā, Amaravati, Nagārjunakoṇḍā, Ellora, and so on, were well sculpted with knowledge of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The sculptors have also been inspired by the dance and dramatic elements seen in the literary works. *Thantonri Perumal* temple in Kāñci is said to have the sculptures related to the drama called *Mattavilāsa prahasana*. Temples during medieval period prove that the sculptors had technical knowledge about these art forms.

The Hindu trinities *Śiva*, *Viṣṇu* and *Brahma* along with their *vāhanas*, *Nandi*, *Garuḍa* and *Hamsa* respectively are seen in a huge *Hindu* temple built during the ninth century is seen in Prāmbaṇan, Central Java. Many dance figures portraying the movement of *apsaras* and panels showing the *Rāmāyana* scenes, which have been the source for the classical dance seen in Indonesia and Thailand. There are also many sculptures portraying the elements of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, which proves that this work has spread over all through South-east Asia. The sculptures should have followed the *mārga* or the *deśi* forms prevailing in their region.

Dance movements found in sculptures

Elements found in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and post Bharata works related to dance were all given a visual effect in the temple sculptures. Many dance forms, which are prevailing today, can also be identified in those sculptures. They have depicted some of the movements of the *cārīs* described in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The *karaṇa* movements were gracefully sculpted thus giving a three-dimensional effect in South-Indian temples such as Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Chidambaram, Vridhachalam and Thiruvannamalai. The verses of *karaṇas* from the text *Nāṭyaśāstra* are seen engraved in *grantha* script under the *karaṇa* sculptures in the *gopuram* of *Cidambaram* temple. There are also many movements such as *cārīs*, *piṇḍibandhas* are found in temples of Dārāsuram, Gangaikonda Cholapuram, Mahabalipuram, Madurai, Kanchipuram, Hampi, Belur, Halebeid and many more. Rājārani, Parameśvara, Vithal-deul temples of Orissa have *cārīs* and *sthānas* engraved. Dr. C. Sivaramamurthy opines that the sculptural panels provide visual effect of the movements. Temple sculptures connected with *cārīs* and *karaṇas* are seen in Indonesian temples. Dancer and research scholar Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam has identified nearly fifty-three *karaṇas* out of sixty two dance figures seen in the temple balustrade. In this temple, the motion of the *karaṇa* is beautifully captured through continuous three figures representing a *karaṇa*. The other important aspect of *nṛtta* depicted in the sculptures includes *recakas*, *bhramarīs* and *utplavanas*, and the group composition indicated by the term *piṇḍibandhas*. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions all these movements along with definitions. Some other movements, which are seen in these sculptures, are referred to in post Bharata works.

The Bṛhadīśvarar Temple in Thanjavur, is also known as 'Periyakovil' has an inscription denoting that there were four hundred dancers attached to the temple. Above the sanctum sanctorum on the first tier, a passage contains the *karaṇas* as explained in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Only eighty-one *karaṇas* are sculpted out of 108. The movement is shown through the sculptures



holding weapons such as *triśūla*, *mazhu*, and the like, and the instruments like cymbals, *vīṇā* and many more. The four arms of Lord Śiva depicts the course of the movement of the hands such as the *nṛttahastas*. Other than this there are many sculptures related to dance seen around the temple.

The Sāraṅgapaṇi Temple in Kumbakonam has the dance sculptures of *karaṇas* seen on both the sides of the walls of the *gopuram*, tower. There are many small miniature sized sculptures, which play the instruments such as *mṛdaṅgam*, cymbals and *vīṇā*. The movement of *ūrdhvatāṇḍava* is beautifully sculpted on the *gopuram*. The sculptures of warriors fighting, folk dancers are all seen.

The Cidambaram Naṭarāja temple is well known as Tillai and is famous for its sculpture and architecture. It has a *nṛtta sabha*, which is an exceedingly lovely one, with beautiful dance figures carved. There are fifty-six tiers with carving on them, which represents dance poses. It has a sculpture of Śiva in *ūrdhvatāṇḍava karaṇa* as well as *Kālī* in a standing posture, which denotes the defeat of *Kālī* for not being able to perform the *karaṇa*. This *nṛtta maṇḍapam* was used for such ritualistic music and dance performances. The base of this *maṇḍapam* is in the form of chariot with wheels, elephants and horses carved, as if they are pulling the *maṇḍapam*. This is also seen in Dārāsuraṁ temple. The *nṛtta sabha* also contains another panel of *Kāpālikā* and his concubine, which resembles the story of *Mattavilāsa*. The hundred and eight *karaṇas* are carved in each of the four *gopurams* of the Cidambaram temple. The *karaṇas* in eastern and western *gopuras* have the verses of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* inscribed in *Granta* script. However, some *karaṇas* are missing in the southern *gopuram*. There are hundreds of dance movements seen in the sculptures of *Rājasabha*. The sculptures at *Rājasabha* seem to be the *aṅgahāra* movements. The male figures representing the *kohlāṭikā* dance and the *preṅkaṇī* dance, which has acrobatic movements, are seen in the sculptures. These types of dance are given in *Saṅgītaratnākara* and *Saṅgītasamayāsāra*. The *Tiruchuṭru māligai* of the *Amman* shrine has many sculptures related to the *karaṇas* like *mattallī*, *ardhamattallī*, *pārśvajānu*, *ūrdhvajānū*. The movements such as half turns and full turns are beautifully depicted in the sculptures. As far as movements in dance were concerned the *bramarīs*, *utplavanas*, *cāris*, *maṇḍalas* and *piṇḍibandhas* formed an important part of choreography in dance forms.

The Airavateśvara temple in Dārāsuraṁ has many sculptures representing dance and drama. The sculptures related to *piṇḍibandhas* are seen here. The animation of the movement is also depicted in the sculptures. Scenes from *Rāmāyaṇa*, *Mattavilāsa prahasana* are seen. *Deśī* dance forms of *Kohlāṭikā* are engraved in the sculpture. Some *karaṇa* sculptures are also found there. This proves that these types of movements were prevalent during those times.

Temple dancers

Dancers were appointed to perform various forms of dance and they were allotted specific occasions to perform in temples. “The division of the land into musical and dance regions like *gita vinoda valanadu* and *nṛtta vinoda valanadu*, the appointment of 400 dancing girls in the Big temple and providing them with lands and houses to live, and the vast endowments to the temples for the perpetual conduct of musical services in the temples, bear ample proof of the abundant love of the royal artiste towards arts.”



Nattuvans who were the teachers conducted these recitals regularly. There were regular male dancers and *Nattuvans* attached to the temples such as Tiruvidaimarudhur. Dancers who could perform *Avinaya* (mimetic dance) were also appointed by the kings in temple (might be girls). There were a few male dancers, who could perform *agamārga* dance in temple. They both were treated and paid equally. A Chola inscription belonging to Parakesari Kulottunga III (1178-1223 A D) in a ruined temple of Siva at Kulattur in the South prakara wall says the king referred to as Tribhuvana Vira Devar is said to have made the allotment of the turas for *Tiruppāṭṭaḍaivu*, *Meikāṭṭaḍaivu*, *Tiruvālatti* and *Tiruccūlam* for the *Devaradiyar* in the temple of Sundara Coliswaram for the Lord of Kulaikulattur.

Devadāsīs were those who served in the temples. They were well versed in the art form of *kūṭṭhu*. They were responsible for the growth of art and culture in and around the temples of Tamilnadu. They were known as *Nityasumaṅgali-s* and were wedded to the Lord. Dance was used for invoking Gods. Dance became one of the rituals connected with temples. First girl child was dedicated to the temple. Others were married. Dancing girls were known in different names such as *Devadāsi*, *Devaradiyār*, *Taliccheripeṇḍugal*, *Padiyilār*, *Māṅikkam*, *Rudraganigaiyar*, *Riṣabhataliyilār*, *Rudraganikaiar*. They were allotted different duties and responsibilities in different temples.

Dancing girls had enormous talents. In general the dance forms of *Devadāsi-s* were *Sānthikkunippam*, *iḍavu(aḍaivu)*, *malivu*, *agamārgam*, *sindukku* and *vari*. They performed *Tiruppāṭṭaḍaivu*, *Meikāṭṭaḍaivu*, *Tiruvālatti*, *Tiruccūlam*, etc. *Rudraganika* performed *śuddha nṛtta*. Temple inscriptions says, “Even for the dancing girls, Rajaraja specifies proper qualification (*yogyarāhayiruppār*)” as in *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata has assigned due qualifications based on the duties of the drama troupe.

“At Tiruppattur temple, a Pandiyan queen gifted 30 *soliyankāsu* for service on Sivarathri day, which was entrusted with *Kulasekhara Māṅikkam*, a *Devadāsi*”. “There existed a hierarchical classification in precedence of temple dancers like *Riṣabhataliyilār*, *Devaradiyār* and *Padiyilār* in one instance, *Taliccherippeṇḍugal* (who lives perhaps in the street of the temple exclusively intended for them) *Nakkan Padiyilār* (probably women having no wedded husband), *Rudraganika*, *Manikkam* and *Talaikkoli* (having the rod) in another.”

There are references in inscriptions referring to various works of the *Devadāsi-s*. While *Padiyilars* used to perform *Sānthikkunippam*, the *devaradiyars* performed that in Nācchiyar temple. *Padiyilārs* would fan the deity and then *Devaradiyārs* would do. *Riṣabhataliyilar* performed *Agamārgam* and *Varikkolam*. *Taliyilārs* were well versed in music and dance. *Devardiyārs* used to sing *Tiruppadiyam* for *Agamārgam*, *Padiyilārs* performed the dance *Sokkam*.

The *devadāsīs* used to perform this worship while the 16 *upacāras* performed during the *kālasandhi pūja*. One *upacāra* is called the *kumbhahārati* (*kuḍa dīpam*) in which the lamp is lit on the pot like vessel. The other *upacāras* were *gīta*, *vādyā*, *nṛtta* etc. The *devadāsīs* used to perform the *nṛtta upacāras* and also the waving of the *kuḍa dīpam*. This was called *kuḍamurai*. The *devadāsīs* who were attached to that particular temple were only allowed to dance during the temple rituals. Those dancers were only invited for waving the *kuḍa dīpam* who were called *kuḍamurai dāsīs*. These *dāsīs* who had been given *dīkṣa* undergo the austerities. They will go to the temple and clean the vessels connected with these *upacāras*. When all the *upacāras* are performed by the priest using the respective properties like fan, *dīpam*, *cāmaram*, etc, these *dāsīs* would show the hand gestures connected with these *upacāras* in the temple. The *ārati* song was also sung during the procession. There were more styles of solo dances namely *Tiruppāṭṭaḍaivu*,



Meikāṭṭaḍaivu, Tiruvālatti, Tiruccūlam, etc. Tiruvālatti must have been the ritualistic *hārati* dance. The *Devadāsi* was expected to wave a lighted pot, (*kumba-hārati*) and the fly-whisk (*cāmara*) and dance during the daily ritual. This later came to be known as *kuḍamurai* system.

Conclusion

As the bhakti period evolved, the temples became the focal centre for music and dance for more than ten centuries. Dance was practiced and performed in temples as rituals and as an entertainment. Devadasis were appointed in temples in order to do the ritualistic dances. Temples built with beautiful sculptures were architectural wonders. Temples were the cultural centers which enhanced the National heritage. Though modern cultural influences like seizure of our land by the British during the end of 19th century have clogged the Devadasi's ritualistic performances in temples, the temples are still being a performance stage for all the art forms, especially music and dance and thus they are centers which develop our culture and heritage.

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