

KARANAS AT THE CHIDAMBARAM NATARAJA TEMPLE

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ABSTRACT

This article on Karanas at the Chidambaram temple briefly analyses the major temple structures in India which leads us to the history of sculpting dance forms in the prakaras of temples. The course of the article further explores the influence of religions and monarchs in these above mentioned establishments. We then briefly discuss Bharatanatyam, the classical art form that contains Karanas, The natyasastra that explores the rules of Bharatanatyam then we explore the 108 Karanas briefly and finally analyse the representation of Karanas at Chidambaram temple.

KEYWORDS

Karanas, Chidambaram temple, Bharatanatyam, Natyasastra, Bharathamuni, Classical dance, Indian dance form, Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, Mudras, Temples, Sculpture, Culture, Art.

INTRODUCTION

Indian temple sculpture can be divided into two types: the Nagara (North India) and the Dravidian (South India). The primary difference between the two is the way in which the shikharas of the temples are carved out. As far as the architectural elements are concerned these include the garbhagriha, vimanas, mandapas, miniature towers, lathe turned pillars and others. These are common to almost all the Hindu temple sculptures. Another interesting facet of the Indian temple sculptures is the Indian cave temples.

The sculptures of the 2nd and 3rd century BC depict the episodes from the life of Lord Buddha, in the architectural setting of the Vedic period. The Hindu Temples are unique temples among India's prehistoric monuments. The symbolic meaning can be viewed in the architecture of the temple with its three elements, namely, the base, the walls and the spire, which correspond to Earth, Space and Heaven.

In our article, we briefly explore the representation of dance forms in sculptures especially at south Indian temples having Chidambaram Nataraja temple being our key focus. Tamil Nadu is a home to many magnificent temples. The dynastic rulers of Tamil land namely Pallavas, Cholas, Pandyas, Vijayanagara empire, Nayakas and Marathas made great contributions towards this. All the great rulers were patrons of art and promoted dance and music which flourished since ancient times in the temples they built. The dynastic rulers left behind a rich legacy in the form of magnificent temples. They took utmost care not only to build the temples but also to preserve the sculptures in them. Each successive dynasty not only preserved what was already built and also extended the temples adding their own dimensions to them. Dancers as courtesans and court musicians who excelled in their art were also prevalent in the kingdoms. Many rulers were themselves well versed in dance and music.

Religion seems to have influenced the construction of temples and dance. In ancient times the temples formed the religious and socio economic centres. The temples were not just places of worship.





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They were the centres of several activities. The kings, queens and ministers spent a considerable portion of the state wealth in constructing and maintaining these temples , influencing them in making dance sculptures in their artistic establishments.

BHARATANATYAM

Bharatanatyam is an Indian classical dance form that originated in Tamil Nadu. It is one of eight Indian classical dance forms recognized by the Sangeet Natak Academy, and expresses South Indian religious themes and spiritual ideas, particularly of Shaivism and in general of Hinduism. A description of precursors of Bharatanatyam from the 2nd century CE can be found in the ancient Tamil epic *Silappadikaram*, while temple sculptures of the 6th to 9th century CE suggest dance was a refined performance art by the mid-1st millennium CE. Sadir Attam, which was renamed Bharatanatyam in 1932, is the oldest classical dance tradition in India. Bharatanatyam is the state dance form of Tamil Nadu. The theme of our article, Karanas are a part of this esteemed classical art form. Bharathamuni explains the rules and regulations of performing classical dance forms especially Bharatanatyam in his text *Natyasastra*

THE NATYASAstra

The *Nāṭya Śāstra* is a Sanskrit treatise on the performing arts. The text is attributed to sage Bharatamuni , and its first complete compilation is dated to between 200 BCE and 200 CE, but estimates vary between 500 BCE and 500 CE. In *Natyasastra* the sage discusses various rules and techniques that should be followed by performance artists like Rasa, Raga, Dattilam and Tala.

KARANAS

Karanas are the 108 key transitions in the classical Indian dance described in 4th Chapter named "Tandava Lakshana" of *Natyashastra*, *Karana* is a Sanskrit verbal noun, meaning "doing". *Natyashastra* states that Karanas are the framework for the "margi" (pan-Indian classical) productions which are supposed to spiritually enlighten the spectators, as opposed to the "desi" (regional folk or pop dance) productions which can only entertain the spectators. "One who performs well this Karana dance created by Maheswara will go free from all sins to the abode of this deity," states *Natyashastra*. Some of the well-known interpretations of karanas are by Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam that were based on 108 brief movement phrases describing specific leg, hip, body, and arm movements accompanied by hasta mudras described in the *Natyashastra* and other scriptures, and from depictions of the movements in sculpture in five South Indian temples, notably the Chidambaram temple which contains depictions of the full set. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam has written a book called *Karanas-Common dance codes of India and Indonesia*, based on her research of karanas from the temples of Prambanan (Indonesia), Thanjavur, Kumbakonam, Chidambaram, Thiruvannamalai, and Vriddhachalam. In the 20th century, she was the first dancer to reconstruct the Karanas as movements, which were considered mere poses earlier.

QUOTATIONS

1. *Natyashastra* describes Karanas as "hastapaada samaayogaah nrttsya karanam bhavet". It is a combination of three elements, namely nritta hasta (dance movement of the hands), sthaana (a dance posture for the body) and a chaari (a dance movement of the leg). The karanas form the basis of the adavus.

2. USAGE OF KARANAS

Manomohan ghosh, m. A , ph. D in his english translation of *natyashastra*, briefs on karanas as





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"The combined movement of hands and feet in dance". Two Karanas will make one Matrka, and two, three, or four Matrkas will make up one Angahara. Three Karanas will make a Kalapaka, four a Sandaka, and five a Samghataka. Thus the Angaharas consist of six. Seven, eight or nine Karanas. Karanas will be used in dance, fight, personal combat, walking as well as movement in general.

- Foot movements which have been prescribed for the exercise of Sthanas and Caris, will apply also to these Karanas.
- An application of the Nrta-hastas which have been prescribed for dance is generally implied in the Karanas.
- The Sthanas, the Caris and the Nrta-hastas mentioned [before] are known as the Matrkas the variations of which are called the Karanas.
- I shall treat the Caris suitable for [representing] fight at the time of discussing the foot movements. The master [of dramatic art] should apply them on any occasion according to his histrionic talents.
- In the Karana the left hand should generally be held on the breast, and the right hand is to follow the [right] foot.
- Listen [now] about the movement of hands and feet in dance in relation to that of hip, sides, thigh as well as to breast, back and belly.

LIST OF 108 KARANAS

A total of 108 karanas are curated in the classical art of Bharatanatyam by the holy sage Bharata Muni. The total karanas are enlisted as follows:

1. Talapūṣpapuṭam 2. Vartitam 3. Valitōrukam 4. Apavidam 5. Samanakam 6. Līnam 7. Swastikarēchitam 8. Maṇḍalaswastikam 9. Nikuṭṭakam 10. Ardhanikuṭṭam 11. Kaṭichinnam 12. Ardharēchitam 13. Vakśaswastikam 14. Unmattam 15. Swastikam 16. Pṛṣṭhaswastikam 17. Dikswastikam 18. Alātam 19. Katisamam 20. Akṣiptarecitam 21. Vikṣiptakṣiptakam 22. Ardhaswastikam 23. Añchitam 24. Bhujāṅgatrāsitam 25. Ūrdhvajānu 26. Nikuñchita 27. Mattalli 28. Ardhamattalli 29. Rēchitanikuṭṭam 30. Pādāpaviddakam 31. Valitam 32. Gūrṇitam 33. Lalitam 34. Daṇḍapakśam 35. Bhujāṅgatrastarēchitam 36. Nūpuram 37. Vaiśākharēchitam 38. Bhramaram 39. Chaturam 40. Bhujāṅgāñchitam 41. Daṇḍarēchitam 42. Vṛśchikakuṭṭitam 43. Kaṭibhrāntam 44. Latāvṛśchikam 45. Chinnam 46. Vṛśchikarēchitam 47. Vṛśchikam 48. Vyamsitam 49. Pārśvanikuṭṭakam 50. Lalāṭatilakam 51. Krāntam 52. Kuñchitam 53. Chakramaṇḍalam 54. Urōmaṇḍalam 55. Ākṣiptam 56. Talavilāsitam 57. Argaḷam 58. Vikṣiptam 59. Āvartam 60. Dōlāpādam 61. Vivṛttam 62. Vinivṛttam 63. Pārśvakraṅtam 64. Niṣumbhitam 65. Vidyutbhrāntam 66. Atikrāntam 67. Vivartitakam 68. Gajakrīḍitam 69. Talasamsphoṭitam 70. Garuḍaplutam 71. Gaṇḍasūchī 72. Parivṛttam 73. Pārśvajānu 74. Gṛdrāvalīnakam 75. Sannatam 76. Sūchī 77. Ardhasūchī 78. Sūchīviddham 79. Apakraṅtam 80. Mayūralalitam 81. Sarpitam 82. Daṇḍapādam 83. Harinaplutam 84. Prēnkōlitam 85. Nitambam 86. Skalitam 87. Karihashtam 88. Prasarpitam 89. Simhavikrīḍitam 90. Simhākarṣitam 91. Udvr̥ttam 92. Upaśrtam 93. Talasaṅghaṭṭitam 94. Janitam 95. Avahittakam 96. Nivēśam 97. Ēlakākṛīḍitam 98. Ūrūdvṛttam 99. Madaskalitam 100. Viṣṇukrāntam 101. Sambhrāntam 102. Viśkhambam 103. Udghaṭṭitam 104. Vṛśabhakrīḍitam 105. Lōlitam 106. Nāgāpasarpitam 107. Śakaṭāśyam 108. Gaṅgāvataranam

A few important karanas

Let's discuss a few important karanas below according to Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam's detailed



1. Talapuspaputa: Puspaputa hand to the left side, the (right) foot in Agratalasancara and the side (hips) bend (sideways to the left).
2. Aksipta: Hands and feet in quick succession in Aksipta.
3. Vartita: One hand in Vyavrtta, the other in Parivartita. Both bent at the wrists, and then placed on the thighs.
4. Talavilasita: Foot with the toe upwards stretched to the side and the palms of the hands bent.
5. Valitoru: Sukatunda hands in Vyavrtta and parivartita and the thighs in Valita (bent).
6. Argala: Feet two and half tala-s apart, hands stretched out in front.
7. Aparaiddha: The Right hand in the Sukatunda gesture to be placed on the right thigh with a circular movement and the left on the chest.
8. Viksipta: Hand and foot thrown out together to the side or backwards.
9. Samanakha: The two feet touching each other toe to toe (lit. their nails in a straight line) the two hands hanging down and the body in a natural (straight) pose.
10. Avar(-vr)ta(-tta): Kuncita foot stretched and turned round (or drawn back) hands moving accordingly.

KARANAS IN CHIDAMBARAM TEMPLE

Dance is illustrated everywhere in the Chidambaram temple. The 108 karanas are illustrated in the gopurams. Dancers are depicted in reliefs on the base of the Raja Sabha and in the prakaram of the shrine of Sivakamasundari. In Chidambaram the passages through all four gopurams have been decorated with complete representation of all 108 karanas, ensured by the fact that in the east and west gopuram the panels are accompanied by the relevant verse from the Natya Shastra. Here a female dancer accompanied by two musicians performs the movements. The east, south and west gopuram have been dated to the 12th and 13th century, the north gopuram somewhat later. The series are largely identical in all four gopuram. A few pictorial representations of the Karanas at Chidambaram temple are explored in these following figures.



FIGURE 1 : REPRESENTATION OF KARNAS IN CHIDAMBARAM TEMPLE.



FIGURE 2: SCULPTURE OF DANCING SHIVA IN CHIDAMBARAM TEMPLE.



FIGURE 3: KARANA KARIHASTA (87), EAST GOPURAM OF THE SHIVA NATARAJA TEMPLE IN CHIDAMBARAM.

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