

## Dancing Images in the Gōpuras : A New Perspective on Dance Sculptures in South Indian Temples

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## **Dancing Images in the *Gōpuras*: A New Perspective on Dance Sculptures in South Indian Temples**

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Dance is an outstanding theme in the fine arts of India. Throughout Indian art history, images of dance have been repeatedly shown in sculptures and paintings. The highly developed expressions of these images are extremely attractive, and the flexible and numerous expressions of body movement are astonishing. Dance depicted in sculptures and paintings provides enormous clues not only for understanding the fine arts, but also for appreciating the dance expression in living tradition. Through dance in stone and picture, we recall the traces of a tradition that was not recorded. To date, sculptures and paintings with dancing figures in India have been keenly observed as visual references for reconstructing the lost links in the heritage of Indian dance. In the last century, dance in India was vigorously revived, partly in connection with a new national identity that originated together with the freedom struggle. For example, the revival of Odissi began in 1949, stemming from research on dance sculptures in the temples as vital sources, and “contemporary odissi dance in its phase of revival has drawn creatively from sculptures” (Kothari and Pasricha 1990: 32). With the strong belief that “dance has influenced sculptures deeply” (Subrahmanyam 1979: 53), dancers seek their lost tradition in the sculptural and pictorial expression of dance. The immovable dancing images in temples inspire the aspiring dancers, but a complete study of these images from a holistic view of fine arts is required to create an awareness of a range of aspects implicit in the plastic art representation. In this paper, a distinctive method is introduced for studying the dancing images of sculptures, based on observation of the sculptures together with other motifs in the temple architecture. The objective is to present a distinctly art-historical viewpoint on the study of dance sculptures in South India.

Scholarly studies of the dance sculptures of the South Indian temples focus on two features of dancing images: the iconographical study pioneered by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy and the research on the so-called *karana* sculptures advanced by Venkata Narayanaswami Naidu, Srinivasulu Naidu and Venkata Rangayya Pantulu. In his study of Indian art history, Coomaraswamy (1912) presented a remarkable start for investigating the representation of dance in fine arts, and the dance of Śiva in statues was investigated for its symbolism as a manifestation of the deity’s divine nature. Based on the iconographical interpretation of the dance in fine arts, T. A. Gopinatha Rao (1914) also dealt with the dancing of deities and further pursued the philosophical analysis of dance expression in sculptures. As a corollary to Coomaraswamy’s study, Rao presented one methodology to elucidate the meanings of dance in sculptures and paintings, which has been followed by scholars such as C. Sivaramamurti (1975), and B. Natarajan (1994). In these studies,

dancing is a divine activity, and understanding it in this way leads us to realize the comprehensive divine nature of gods and goddesses in India.

On the other hand, dance in sculptures and paintings has been studied exclusively from a restricted viewpoint. The Madras Epigraphical Report for 1914 introduced the *karaṇa* sculptures displayed on the inner wall of *gōpura* in the Natarāja temple at Cidambaram (with the wood-cut illustrations of 93 out of the total of 108 remaining images). *Karaṇa* is the elemental movement of the arms and legs from which all possible dance sequences may be composed (Rabe 1993: 125) and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* describes one hundred and eight *karaṇas*. Venkata Narayanaswami Naidu, Srinivasulu Naidu and Venkata Rangayya Pantulu identified those reliefs as the *karaṇas* denoted in the canon with inscriptional references, and compiled the *Tāṇḍava Lakṣaṇam* (1936). For instance, the posture of a female dancer sculpted on the wall of the Cidambaram *gōpura* in which both hands are crossed in front of the chest, the knees are wide open and the legs crossed is defined as *Svastika*, a *karaṇa* with “hands and feet respectively held together in the *Svastika* form” (Naidu et al. 1936: 25; *Nāṭyaśāstra* IV: 76). It is noteworthy that their study was based on the significant idea that dancing in sculptures and the tradition of Indian dance are coherently associated. This research invigorated the study of this subject and of dance in sculptures and paintings, and has drawn the attention of scholars and dancers. Kapila Vatsyayan noted various sculptures depicting dance scenes in *Classical Indian Dance in Literature and Arts* (1968). She described one nature of sculptures in India as being that “the Indian sculptor whether he was creating sculpture in the round, or relief, high or low, or casting bronze or sculpturing in wood, he was conscious of the human body a most powerful instrument for the communication of moods, *bhāva* and *rasa*. Like the creative poet and dramatist he was also knowledgeable. His imagination was harnessed to the canons of not only sculpture but also dance text. Through these examples of Indian sculpture one can reconstruct to some extent a history of movement of Indian dance” (Vatsyayan 1968: 325-6), and applied this method to identify the *karaṇas* in images of dancers from ancient times.<sup>1)</sup>

One type of study of the dancing images of sculptures focuses on the interpretation of dance in those images, while the other type identifies their dance movements. Neither type is sufficient for developing an art-historical methodology of the temples of India because the implications of dance and the movements of dance are not the only facets of dance representations. Although they bring out visual references, especially for understanding the tradition of dance, those studies tend to extract the dancing images from the place where they are represented and observe them in isolation from other motifs that were originally shown together. We must be aware of the possibility in such studies of misconstruing the dance carved in stone as the direct root of living culture.

Discrepancies exist between dance in sculptures and dances in the living tradition. As noted by Kapila Vatsyayan (ibid.: 269-70), the movement of dance can be depicted only in a limited way, and only one point of movement alone can be captured in the plastic medium. Moreover, sculptures and paintings are always influenced by the artist's taste, viewers, patronage, region and times. When studying the reliefs or sculptures in Indian temples, one should be aware that images are produced in terms of the precise definition that is to be represented and of the location where they are to be installed. It is not difficult

to infer that these dancing images are closely related to other motifs and to the places where they are accommodated. Certainly, the dancing figures might be influenced by the symbolism and the cosmology represented in the temples, and such studies are equally important. At the same time, from the art historical perspective, the issue facing researchers and scholars is whether representations of dance in sculptures and paintings should be studied independently or in conjunction with the other motifs that are presented together with them.

If we wish to find out about Indian dance through sculptures, and about Indian fine arts through dancing images, we have to be prepared to address the problems before us with respect to the method of study of these art objects. The main aim of this paper is to explore a new method for studying the dancing images in Indian temples. Research using data systematically collected from fieldwork could provide an effective methodology, as this involves all the images and motifs. This method of study was not allocated great importance in the early studies. Based on the analysis and comparison of dancing images, the representation of dance in Indian temples is to be examined as described below. This paper focuses on the temples built in the later Cōla period when dance played an important role in the art of sculptures, especially on the dancing figures seen in the *gōpuras* of that period.

### Images on the Inner Walls of the *Gōpuras*

In the history of India, the Cōla dynasty in South India was one of the great periods of patronage for dance and music, and the dynasty made an immense contribution to enriching the visual form of dance. The bronze statues of Naṭarāja were representative works in this era. After the glorious time of the middle Cōla, Kulōttuṅga I (1070-1122),<sup>2)</sup> who succeeded to this large empire in 1070, the construction and extension of temples continued until the reign of Kulōttuṅga III (1178-1218), the last of the great Cōla emperor. During the later Cōlas, the temples were filled with dance sculptures of a certain style and form. Deities are often exhibited in the act of dancing, like Śiva-Naṭarāja or the dancing Gaṇēśa. Numerous dancing figures cover the surfaces of the pillars and walls of temples, together with other motifs. Of several architectural innovations made during that period, the most important was the construction of the *gōpura*, the elevated tower-gate. The later Cōla temples like the Kāmpahareśvara in Tribhuvāṇam, the Nāgēśvarasvāmi in Kumbhakōṇam and the Somanātha in Paḷayārai have dancing images sculpted on the inner walls of their *gōpuras*. Here I will analyze those dancing figures together with other images.

#### Formula for Dance Postures

Analysis of dancing expressions reveals particular postures that are frequently seen. Here, the codes for dancing postures are defined as follows.

#### Upper part of the body: arms and hands (shown as “U”)

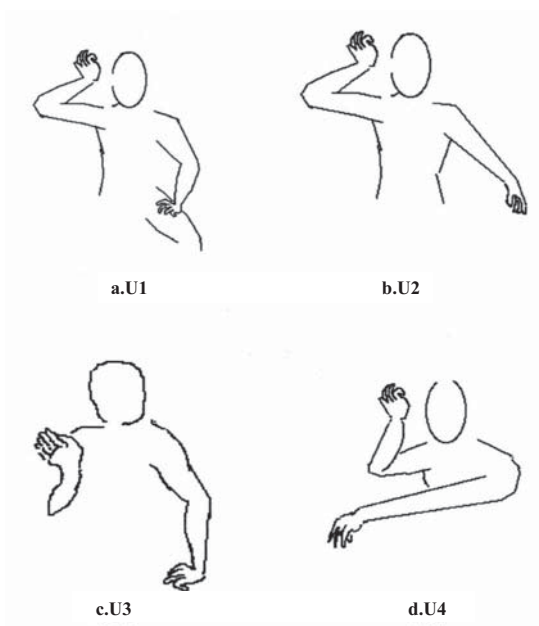
U1 (Fig. 1a) – one hand on the thigh and the other hand in *alapadma* raised up to the head level. According to the *Abhinayadarpaṇa*, the *alapadma* is the hand gesture

in which the fingers are bent and separated from one another, starting from the little finger (Ghosh 1975: 53).

U2 (Fig. 1b) – one hand in *alapadma* raised up to head level, the other hand together with the arm reaching down alongside the body.

U3 (Fig. 1c) – one hand in *paṭāka* (hand in which the thumb is bent to touch fingers and the fingers are extended) kept at shoulder level and the other hand on the thigh (ibid.: 49).

U4 (Fig. 1d) – one hand in *alapadma* kept near the head and the other hand together with the arm crossing the chest obliquely.



**Figure 1** The upper part of the body (arms and hands)

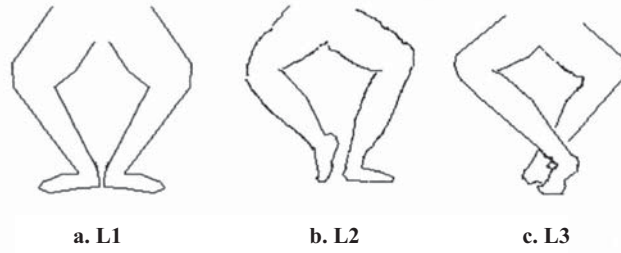
### **Lower part of the body: legs and feet (shown as “L”)**

The following iconographies of legs and feet are prominent in the dancing images studied.

L1 (Fig. 2a) – both feet are turned outwards, the knees wide apart.

L2 (Fig. 2b) – one foot is bent with the weight resting on the tip of its toe, the other turned outwards, the knees wide apart.

L3 (Fig. 2c) – both knees are wide open, the legs crossed at the ankles.



**Figure 2** The lower part of the body (legs and feet)

### Images of Somanātha Temple, Paḷayārai

The village of Paḷayārai is about 11 km southeast of Kumbhakōṇam. The place was known from the Pallava period, but its importance grew considerably during the later Cōḷa period when many monarchs made their residences there, especially Vikrama Cōḷa (1118-1135) (Balasubrahmanyam 1979: 199). Because of its artistic similarity to the Vikramacōḷīśvaram at Tukkacci, the Airāvateśvara at Dārāsuram and the Kaṇṇpahareśvara at Tribhuvanam, the Somanātha temple is assigned to the period 1130-1160 (ibid.: 200). The temple had two walls of enclosure, with the outer one in ruins remaining. On the inner wall of the remaining *gōpura* in the east, ten panels are vertically arranged in each of eight rows containing dancing images along with other figures. There two lines are located in each direction: northeast (I, II), northwest (III, IV), southeast (V, VI) and southwest (VII, VIII). The images sculpted on each panel are as follows (panel numbers are listed from top to bottom in each line).

#### Line I

1. Too damaged to identify images.
2. A standing woman with a flower in her hand.
3. A drummer.
4. A human figure holding a stick (?).<sup>3)</sup> The knees of the image are wide open, legs crossed at the ankles.
5. A human figure holding a stick (?). The knees are wide open, legs crossed at the ankles.
6. A female dancer with both hands hanging down at either side of the body. Her legs and feet form the lower posture L1.
7. A human figure holding a *triśūla* (trident) (?) in the left hand. Both feet of the image are turned outwards and the knees are wide apart.
8. A female dancer with the right hand kept in front of the chest with its wrist bent, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The combined lower posture is L1.
9. A female dancer with the right arm extending downward and crossing the chest obliquely, the left arm raised. The lower posture of the figure is L1.
10. *Kṣetrapāla*, an image of the guardian of Śaiva temples.

**Line II**

1. Too damaged to identify images.
2. Too damaged to identify images.
3. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the other hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
4. A female dancer who has hands and arms in the same posture as the image sculpted on panel II.3. Here, the dancer raises the right hand. The combined lower posture is L3.
5. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel II.3.
6. A female dancer who exhibits the same posture as the images sculpted on panels II.3 and II.5.
7. Too damaged to identify images.
8. A woman in the upper posture U1 with one hand on the thigh and the other hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. Both legs of the dancer are in normal standing position.
9. A female dancer in the same posture as the images sculpted on the panels II.3, II.5 and II.6.
10. Too damaged to identify images.

**Line III**

1. Too damaged to identify images.
2. Too damaged to identify images.
3. A standing human figure.
4. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with one hand on the thigh and the other one in *alapadma* raised at head level. The position of the legs cannot be identified because of the poor state of preservation.
5. A standing woman holding a flower in her left hand. The lower posture is L1.
6. *Śālabhañjikā*.
7. A drummer.
8. A female dancer in the upper posture U4 with the left hand in *alapadma* raised at head level, the right hand and arm are reaching down alongside the body. The legs and feet are presented in the lower posture L1.
9. A drummer.
10. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with one hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the other hand resting on the thigh. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.

**Line IV**

1. Too damaged to identify images.
2. A drummer.
3. A female dancer with both hands hanging down on either side of the body. The lower posture represented in that figure is L1.
4. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with one hand on the thigh and the other hand in *alapadma*. The combined lower posture is L1.
5. A female dancer with the right arm extending downward and crossing the chest obliquely and the left raised in *paṭāka*. The lower posture shown in that dancing figure

is L1.

6. A drummer.
7. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The knees of the dancer are wide open and the legs crossed at the ankles, forming the lower posture L3.
8. A female dancer with one hand in *paṭāka* held at shoulder level, the other hand and arm reaching down. The lower posture illustrated in that figure is L1.
9. *Śālabhañjikā*.
10. Dancing Arjuna with both hands held together stretched out and both legs opened straight, the body being twisted.<sup>4)</sup>

#### Line V

1. Too damaged to identify images.
2. Too damaged to identify images.
3. A female dancer in the upper posture U2 combined with the lower posture L3.
4. A human figure in normal standing position.
5. A female dancer who presents the upper posture U2 combined with the lower posture L1.
6. A cymbal player.
7. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The lower posture is L1.
8. A female dancer with the left arm extending downward and crossing the chest obliquely, the right hand raised in *alapadma*, forming the upper posture U4. The lower posture of that figure is L3.
9. A female dancer in the upper posture U3 with the left hand resting on the thigh, the right hand in *paṭāka* held at shoulder level, combined with the lower posture L1.
10. *Śālabhañjikā*.

#### Line VI

1. A drummer.
2. A female dancer with one hand resting on the thigh, the other hand in *paṭāka* held in front of the chest, combined with the lower posture L1.
3. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The combined lower posture in that figure is L2.
4. A female dancer with the right arm extended upwards, the left arm downwards. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
5. A female dancer in the upper posture U3 with one hand resting on the thigh, the other hand in *paṭāka* held at shoulder level. The lower posture seen in that figure is L3.
6. Too damaged to identify images.
7. Too damaged to identify images.
8. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The combined lower posture is L1.



9. *Śālabhañjikā*.
10. *Śālabhañjikā*.

### Line VII

1. A standing human figure.
2. A female dancer with the right hand kept in front of the chest with its wrist bent, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.
3. *Śālabhañjikā*.
4. A female dancer with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The legs and feet are illustrated in the lower posture L1.
5. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel VII.4. Here, the right hand rests on the thigh.
6. A female dancer with one hand in *alapadma* at shoulder level, the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The combined lower posture is L1.
7. A male dancer with a beard: one hand in *alapadma* is raised, the other hand in *patāka* held at shoulder level. Both feet of the image are turned outwards, the knees wide apart, forming L1.
8. A woman with a flower in her right hand.
9. *Śālabhañjikā*.
10. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level and the left hand reaching up to head level. The lower posture shown by the figure is L1.

### Line VIII

1. Too damaged to identify images.
2. An unidentified motif.
3. A standing woman holds a pot in the left hand. Both feet of the image are turned outwards, the knees wide apart.
4. A female dancer with both hands hanging down on either side of the body. The combined lower posture is L1.
5. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The legs and feet form the lower posture L1.
6. A standing man with headgear.
7. A female dancer in the upper posture U2 with the left hand in *alapadma* raised at head level, the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The legs and feet form the lower posture L1.
8. Dancing Gaṇeśa. His right hand is held at shoulder level, the right hand and arm stretched upwards. In his dancing, one foot is bent with the weight resting on the tip of its toe, the other one turned outwards, the knees wide apart.
9. A drummer.
10. Bhīma with Kīchaka.

### Images of Nāgēśvarasvāmi Temple, Kumbhakōṇam

Nāgēśvarasvāmi temple is located in the heart of the city of Kumbhakōṇam. Its *gōpura* with squat brick towers shows the typical architectural style of the late Cōḷa period, while its main shrine has been described as the finest monument of the early Cōḷas (Harle 1986: 296-7). As in the case of Paḷayārai temple, the Nāgēśvarasvāmi *gōpura* has a series of panels vertically arranged and decorated with dancing figures (Plate 1). On the inner wall of that passageway, there are eight rows of panels, each containing five or six panels. Two lines with panels are located in each direction: northeast (I, II), northwest (III, IV), southeast (V, VI) and southwest (VII, VIII). The images sculpted on each panel are listed as follows.

#### Line I

1. A female dancer with the right hand on the thigh and the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
2. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* at shoulder level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
3. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel I.2.
4. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the images sculpted on panels I.2 and I.3.
5. *Śālabhañjikā*.

#### Line II

1. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the other hand resting on the thigh. The legs and feet form the lower posture L2.
2. A female dancer with the right hand on the thigh and the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body, combined with the lower posture L1.
3. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, while the left arm is reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture seen in that figure is that one foot is lifted up, the other turned outwards.
4. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel II.2. Here, the left hand in *alapadma* is raised at shoulder level.
5. A female dancer who has hands and arms in the same posture as the image sculpted on panel II.3. The lower posture shown by this figure is L1.

#### Line III

1. A female dancer with the right hand in *paṭāka* held



**Plate 1** Kumbhakōṇam. Nāgēśvarasvāmi temple, east *gōpura*, dancing figures

at shoulder level and the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The legs and feet of that figure form the lower posture L1.

2. A female dancer with the right hand on the thigh and the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The legs and feet form the lower posture L2.
3. A female dancer with the right hand kept in front of the chest with its wrist bent. The left hand and arm are reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture illustrated in that figure is L1.
4. A female dancer with the right hand resting on the thigh, the left hand and arm extended upwards. The lower posture rendered in that figure is L3.
5. A female dancer who has hands and arms in the same posture as the image sculpted on panel III.2, combined with the lower posture L1.

#### Line IV

1. A female dancer with the right hand on the thigh and the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The feet and legs are presented in the lower posture L1.
2. A female dancer in the same posture as the image sculpted on panel IV.1.
3. A female dancer with both hands hanging down on either side of the body. The lower posture of that figure is L1.
4. A female dancer in the upper posture U4 with the right arm extending downward and crossing the chest obliquely, the left hand raised in *alapadma*. The combined lower posture is L3.
5. A female dancer in the same posture as the image sculpted on panel IV.3.
6. A female dancer who has hands and arms in the same posture as the images sculpted on panels IV.1 and IV.2. The lower posture in that figure is L3.

#### Line V

1. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the right hand on the thigh, the left hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.
2. A female dancer with both hands hanging down at either side of the body. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
3. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The combined lower posture is L1.
4. *Śālabhañjikā*.
5. A female dancer with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.

#### Line VI

1. A female dancer with the right hand placed in front of the chest with its wrist bent, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture represented in that figure is L1.
2. A female dancer in the upper posture U2 with the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower part of body in that dancing figure is missing.

3. Too damaged to identify images.
4. A female dancer with one hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture is L1.
5. A female dancer in the upper posture U2 combined with the lower posture L1.

#### Line VII

1. Too damaged to identify images.
2. A female dancer with the right hand held in front of the chest with its wrist bent, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.
3. Too damaged to identify images.
4. A female dancer with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
5. A female dancer with both hands hanging down on either side of the body. The lower posture of that figure is L3.

#### Line VIII

1. A female dancer with the left hand held in front of the chest with its wrist bent, the right hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.
2. A female dancer in the same posture as seen in the image sculpted on panel VIII.1. Here, the left hand of that figure is hanging down.
3. A standing woman with a flower in her hand.
4. Too damaged to identify images.
5. A female dancer with the left hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the right hand resting on the thigh. The combined lower posture is L1.
6. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* at shoulder level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture demonstrated by that figure is L1.

#### Images of Kāṃpahareśvara Temple, Tribhuvāṇam

Tribhuvāṇam is about 6 km from Kuṃbhakōṇam. The Kāṃpahareśvara temple, built by Kulōttuṅga III, has the last of the large *vimāna* of the later Cōḷas (Harle 1986: 318). The outer *gōpura* in the east attached to this temple dominates the elevation of the main shrine and the entire axial structure comprises *vimāna*, *ardhamaṇḍapa*, *mahāmaṇḍapa* and *mukhamaṇḍapa*. As in the Somanātha and Nāgēśvarasvāmi temples, the inner *gōpura* of the temple possesses a number of panels showing dancing images on its passageway, and these are listed below. The lines with panels are located in the northeast (I), northwest (II), southeast (III), and southwest (IV), with each line vertically comprising nine panels.

#### Line I

1. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* at shoulder level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.

2. A female dancer in the upper posture U2 with the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The combined lower posture in that figure is L1.
3. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the left hand resting on the thigh. The legs and feet form the lower posture L1.
4. A woman holding a musical instrument in her hands.
5. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
6. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel I.2. Here, the left hand is raised in *alapadma*.
7. A female dancing figure in which the left arm is extended upwards, the right downwards with the lower posture L1.
8. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the images sculpted on panels I.2 and I.6. Here, the right hand is raised in *alapadma*.
9. Panel is buried.

## Line II

1. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* at shoulder level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture of that figure is L1.
2. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the left resting on the thigh. The lower posture of that figure is L1.
3. A female dancer with the right hand on the thigh and the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.
4. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel II.3. Here, the left hand rests on the thigh.
5. A female dancer in the upper posture U4 with the left arm extending downward and crossing the chest obliquely, the other hand raised in *alapadma*. The feet and legs are rendered in the lower posture L1.
6. A drummer.
7. *Śālabhañjikā*.
8. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel II.2.
9. Panel is buried.

## Line III

1. A female dancer in the upper posture U2 with the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The combined lower posture in that figure is L1.
2. Śiva and a bull.
3. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
4. A female dancing figure in which the right arm is extended downward and crosses the chest obliquely, the left arm stretched upward. The combined lower posture is L1.

5. A female dancer in the upper posture U4 with the left arm extended down obliquely, the right hand raised in *alapadma*. The lower posture seen in that figure is L1.
6. A human figure holding a stick (?) in the hand.
7. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the right hand on the thigh and the left hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The combined lower posture is L1.
8. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel III.7. Here, the left hand rests on the thigh.
9. Panel is buried.

#### Line IV

1. A female dancer with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the left hand and arm extended upwards. The combined lower posture is L1.
2. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the left hand on the thigh and the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
3. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel IV.2.
4. A drummer.
5. A female dancer in the upper posture U2 with the right hand in *alapadma* raised at head level, the left hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. The legs and feet are illustrated in the lower posture L1.
6. A drummer.
7. A female dancer in the upper posture U1 with the right hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, the left hand resting on the thigh. The lower posture shown by that figure is L1.
8. A female dancer who displays the same posture as the image sculpted on panel IV.7. Here, the left hand is raised in *alapadma*.
9. Panel is buried.

### **Dancing Images in the *Gōpuras* of the Somanātha, the Nāgēśvarasvāmi and the Kāmpahareśvara Temples**

As described above, dancing images are prominent in the passageway of each *gōpura* under study and we can obtain the following evidence from these three *gōpuras*. In the *gōpura* of Somanātha temple, 45 out of 80 panels display female dancers. The dancing postures seen in those figures are limited, and particular positions appear repeatedly. Seven panels (II.3, II.5, II.6, II.9, IV.4, V.7, VIII.5) depict the posture in which one hand rest on the thigh and the other hand is raised in *alapadma* at head level, with both feet turned outwards and the knees wide apart (U1-L1); in two cases (II.4, IV.7), the same posture of hands and arms is depicted with crossed legs (U1-L3). The posture in which both hands hang down on either side of the body combined with the lower posture L1 is seen in three cases (I.6, IV.3, VIII.4). Two images (III.8, VIII.7) are rendered in the posture with one hand in *alapadma* raised at head level, the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body with both feet turned outwards and the knees wide apart (U2-L1) and the same posture of hands and arms with crossed legs (U2-L3) appears on panel V.3. The posture with one hand on the

thigh and the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body, combined with L1 is displayed by two figures (VI.4, VI.5); two figures (I.8, VII.2) have one hand held in front of the chest with its wrist bent, and the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body combined with the lower posture L1.

The *gōpura* of Nāgēśvarasvāmi temple contains 42 panels on the walls of its passageway. All of them depict the figures of female dancers, with the exception of three panels containing two figures of *śālabhañjikā* and a standing woman. In that *gōpura*, nine images (I.1, II.2, II.4, III.2, III.5, IV.1, IV.2, V.5, VII.4) depict the posture with one hand on the thigh and the other hand and reaching down alongside the body combined with the lower posture L1; the same posture of hands and arms combined with the lower posture L2 is observed in one panel (III.2). In seven cases (I.2, I.3, I.4, II.5, V.3, VI.4, VIII.6), dancers are shown with one hand in *alapadma* raised at shoulder level and the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body, combined with the lower posture L1. Other postures appearing repeatedly in those dancing images are: one hand is held in front of the chest with its wrist bent, the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body combined with L1 (III.3, V.1, VII.2, VIII.1, VIII.2); and both hands hanging down on either side of the body with the lower posture L1 (IV.3, IV.5, VI.2).

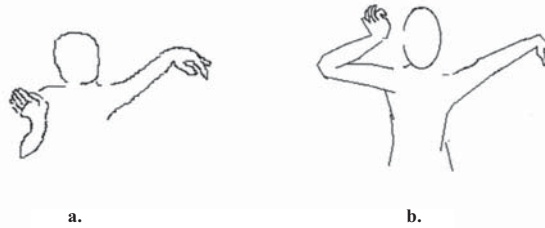
In the Kāmpahareśvara *gōpura*, 25 figures of dancers are visible. Here, the most frequently shown are: U2 combined with the lower posture L1 (I.2, I.6, I.8, III.1, IV.5, IV.8); one hand rests on the thigh and the other is raised in *alapadma* at head level, with both feet turned outwards and the knees wide apart (U1-L1; seen in five panels: I.5, III.7, III.8, IV.2, IV.3). In three cases (I.3, II.2, IV.7), a dancing figure is represented with one hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level and the other resting on the thigh, combined with the lower posture L1.

On the inner wall of the *gōpuras* studied, certain lower postures are presented in a limited way: most of the dancing figures in these *gōpuras* are depicted in L1 and L2. Particular postures are also common in the expression of the dancers' hands and arms. In the Somanātha temple, many images are rendered in U1 (Plate 2), with the next most common postures being that of one hand resting on the thigh and the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body; one hand is held in front of the chest with its wrist bent, the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body; and one hand in *alapadma* is held at shoulder level, the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body. In the Nāgēśvarasvāmi temple, figures are often expressed in U1, with the next most frequently depicted upper postures being U2 and the posture in which one hand is held in front of the chest with its wrist bent and the other hand and arm are reaching down alongside the body. The upper postures most frequently seen in the Kāmpahareśvara *gōpura*



**Plate 2** Paḷayārai. Somanātha temple, east *gōpura*, dancing figure





**Figure 3** The upper body postures frequently observed on the dancing images in the later Cōḷa temples

are U1 (Plate 3), U2 and the posture in which one hand in *alapadma* is held at shoulder level with the other hand resting on the thigh.

The postures in which one hand in *paṭāka* is held at shoulder level and the other hand and arm are extended upward (Figure 3a), and one hand is raised in *alapadma* at head level and the other hand and arm are extended upward (Figure 3b) are observed many times in images of dancers from this period, and are characterized by the arm stretching upwards. The base of the main shrine in Kāmpahareśvara temple has a series of panels with dancing figures. The most frequently appearing posture here is with one hand raised in *alapadma* at head level and the other hand and arm are extended upward (Plate 4), but there is only one dancing image with that posture on the inner wall of the *gōpura* in the same temple (IV.1). In the later Cōḷa temples, the posture with one hand in *paṭāka* held at shoulder level and the other hand and arm stretched upwards occurs very often (Plate 5; Fukuroi 2001b). Strangely enough, this posture is virtually absent in the figures of the *gōpuras* studied, with the exception of a single panel in the Somanātha *gōpura* (IV.8).

On the other hand, the images of dancers in the *gōpuras* under study are frequently depicted in postures like U1 (Figure 4a); U2 (Figure 4b); with a hand placed on the thigh and the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body (Figure 4c); with a hand held in front of the chest with its wrist bent, and the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body (Figure 4d); with a hand raised in *alapadma* at shoulder level, and the other hand and arm reaching down alongside the body (Figure 4e); with a hand in *alapadma* held at shoulder level, and the other resting on the thigh (Figure 4f); and with both hands hanging down on either side of the body (Figure 4g). In those postures, a distinction is made concerning which hand and arm are held downwards or rested on the thigh. These postures are also differentiated from those often presented in dancing images areas of a temple other than the *gōpura*. To understand the characteristic features of dance representation in the *gōpuras*, we also need to observe the other images shown alongside the dancing figures there.





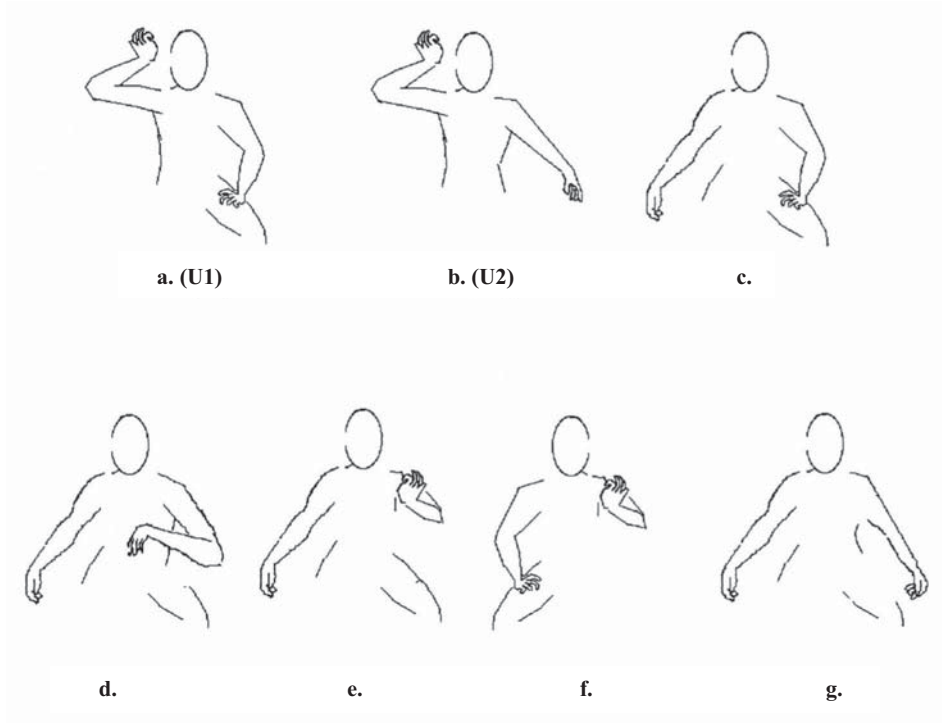
**Plate 3** Tribhuvanam. Kaṁpahareśvara temple, east *gōpura*, dancing figures



**Plate 4** Tribhuvanam. Kaṁpahareśvara temple, *uparīṭha*, dancing scene



**Plate 5** Dārāsuram. Airāvateśvara temple, *uparīṭha*, dancing scene



**Figure 4** The upper part of the body frequently seen in the Somanātha, Nāgēśvarasvāmi and Kaṁpahareśvara *gōpuras*

### ***Śālabhañjikās*: the Nativity and the Dancing Postures on the Inner Walls of *Gōpuras***

Apart from dancing figures, each *gōpura* commonly contains images of *śālabhañjikās*. In the *gōpura* of the Somanātha temple, *śālabhañjikās* are found on panels III.6, IV.9, V.10, VI.9, VI.10, VII.3, and VII.9. Each figure clasps the branch of a tree with one hand or arm, her legs crossed at the ankle, standing with feet together or touching the trunk of the tree with one foot. In the Nāgēśvarasvāmi temple, two figures of *śālabhañjikās* are seen, one on panel I.5 and the other on IV.4. The Kaṁpahareśvara *gōpura* contains one image of *śālabhañjikā* on panel II.7 (Plate 6), clasping the branch of a tree with her left hand, holding a flower with her right and touching the trunk with her left foot.

*Śālabhañjikā* images have been continuously depicted in the sculptures of India since ancient times (Plate 7). With regard to this motif, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy (2001: 32-3) shed light on its symbolism as follows.

There is no motif more fundamentally characteristic of Indian art from first to last than is that of the Woman and Tree . . . . Sometimes these dryads stand on a vehicle (*vāhana*) such as a Yakṣa (*Guhya*), elephant, or crocodile (*makara*). Sometimes they are adorning themselves



**Plate 6** Tribhuvanam. Kāṁpahareśvara temple, east *gōpura*, *śālabhañjikā*



**Plate 7** Sāncī. *Stūpa* No.1, eastern *tōraṇa*, *śālabhañjikā*

with jewels, or using a mirror. Very often they hold with one hand a branch of the tree under which they stand, sometimes one leg is twined round the stem of the tree . . . . Sometimes one foot is raised and rests against the trunk of the tree. Sometimes there are children, either standing beside the dryad mother, or carried astraddle on her hip. Of the trees represented the aśoka and mango are most usual . . . . The word *dohada* means a pregnancy longing, and the tree is represented as feeling, like a woman, such a longing, nor can its flowers open until it is satisfied. Thus the whole conception, even in its latest form as a mere piece of rhetoric, preserves the old connection between tree and tree spirits, and human life.

From Coomaraswamy's interpretation of the symbolism of *vrkṣa* (tree) and *vrkṣadevatās* (tree goddesses), we learn that *śālabhañjikā* is connected with human life and productivity. In the Indian arts, procreation is an important theme that is sometimes expressed in a direct way. The scene of Buddha's birth is one prominent example. The drum slab from Amarāvātī describes the scene of Māyā's dream, the interpretation of her dream and the child presented to the tutelary *yakṣa* of the Śakyas. Within this, the birth of Buddha is dramatically illustrated (Plate 8). In that scene, Māyā holds the branch of the tree with her left hand, with her right hand resting on her waist and her legs crossed. The figure of Buddha is not rendered, but its existence is suggested by small foot prints on the cloth held by the *yakṣas*. Here, the figure of Māyā shows an affinity with the expression of *śālabhañjikā* and the dancing posture U1. The image of *śālabhañjikā* has been taken as a representation of Siddhārtha's birth in terms of the correlation between fertility and tree (Viennot 1954: 146-7). Plate 9 shows one wooden carving discovered in South India, dated to the 18th century (Mookerjee and Khanna 1977: 171).<sup>5)</sup> That panel depicts the moment of



**Plate 8** Amarāvati. British Museum, slab, the scene of Buddha's birth (Kyoto National Museum and Tobu museum of Art 1994: pl.4)



**Plate 9** South India. wood carving, the scene of birth. From Mookerjee and Khanna (1977: 171)

childbirth from the womb of a mother. Like *Māyā*, this mother seizes a branch of a tree with her right hand. Her left hand and arm are extended downward, and both her feet are turned outward with the knees thrown out sideways. The postures seen in the images of *śālabhañjikā* and the mothers in delivery, with one hand holding the branch of a tree and the other hand held downward or rested on the waist, are akin to the dancing postures frequently found on the panels in the passageways of *gōpuras* as described above.

### Symbolism as Creation of *Gōpura*

Now I will examine the place where the dancing images being studied are found. *Gōpura* means “tower-gate” or “the ornamented gateway of a temple,” “tower” and “tower-like structure.” In the general plan of temples in South India, at a minimum the outer walls of the temple compounds are rectangular with two *gōpuras*, one in the east and the other in the south. The earliest *gōpuras* were little more than doorways, such as those in the Shore temple at Māmallapuram and the Kailāsanātha temple at Kāñcīpuram. Other early examples may be found in the Virūpākṣa temple at Paṭṭadakal (Badāmī Cālukya) and the Kailāsanātha (cave No. XVI) in Ēllōrā. Then, early in the 11th century, the *gōpura* rose up vertically and added significance to the temple architecture as a whole. After that, builders of South Indian temples vied to erect the tallest *gōpuras*, with some built during the 16th and 17th centuries finally rising to a height of over 200 feet (Harle 1995: xxi).

As evidenced by Heinrich Zimmer (1955: 278), the *gōpura* is the symbol of the celestial sphere of the god, whose earthly residence is the sacred temple compound. In a

temple, the area surrounded by the enclosure wall is the celestial sphere or sacred world, while the area outside the wall is the earthly sphere or secular world. The principal entrance of the main temple faces east and the compound within contains a tank, courts and shrines. Among them the *vimāna* is comparatively small, having a *liṅga* on a base in Śiva temples, and an anthropomorphic image of the god in Viṣṇu temples. Inside the temple compound stand some other sanctuaries, such as the shrines of Gaṇapati, Subrahmaṇya, Pāvatī and Naṭarāja in a Śiva temple. These sanctuaries thus display the deity in the circle of his family, like the natural unit of life, the deity being worshipped together with his wife and children (Zimmer 1955: 287-8).

Yet the *gōpura* is not simply a passageway connecting the two different worlds, sacred and secular. Exploring the symbolism in Hindu architecture, L. Peter Kollar (2001: 66) makes the following statement.

The generation occurs within the house (*Griha*) of the germ (*Garbha*). It is the secret womb (*Garbhagriha*) in which the new life germinates, understood not in the physical but in the metaphysical sense. In the square, dark chamber is the germ, in the form of the Linga, contained; identifying himself with the germ the sacrificer is born anew and released into spiritual life, “non-characterized” and unconditioned.

In terms of this symbolism of *garbhagriha*, the *gōpura* can be conceptualized as the passageway through which new life generated in the innermost sanctuary of a temple is sent out into the secular world. It can also be said that the *gōpura* is associated with the cosmic *kr̥tya* (function of creation) in the cosmology understood within Indian temples. As observed above, the dancing images sculpted on the passageways of *gōpuras* in the Kāmpahareśvara, Nāgēśvarasvāmi and Somanātha temples remind us of the theme of nativity along with the image of the *śālabhañjikā*. And if nativity is implied in the *gōpura*, it is not improbable that the images of dancers and *śālabhañjikās* depicted in its passageway share the same symbolism. In other words, the groups of dancing images studied and their affinity with *śālabhañjikā* are linked through the symbolism of the place where they are accommodated.

We have so far observed the dancing images on the passageway of *gōpuras* in relation to other motifs and the symbolism presented in Indian temples. The link with *śālabhañjikā* and temple gateways permits us to infer the symbolism of dance as creation, a symbolism that is emphasized by the dancers’ specific postures. In the Indian context, the symbolic meaning of dance as creation is highly significant. In India today, dance is performed on many occasions, in some of which we may witness the symbolism of creation. During the performance, a dancer becomes all kinds of beings such as a king, a loved woman, a mischievous child, a sage, a deity, or an animal. They are expected to convey all sorts of stories and theatrical moods by their dancing. The limitless possibilities of dance performances remind us of the concept of creation. In fact, like a bride during the marriage ceremony, dancers wear ornaments in the shapes of the sun and moon on their heads. Here the body of the dancer is regarded as the universe, and it can be surmised that the cosmic creation is anticipated by the movement of dance.



## Conclusion

The postures of dancing figures, the other motifs represented together with the dancers and the place where they are displayed are all interrelated. We can arrive at the understanding that the images of dancers were created neither to decorate the temple nor to express a single moment of dance, but to evoke a comprehensive mood that is represented in the art of the temple. This is one inference that can be drawn directly. The method introduced here enables us to deduce a number of important aspects of life in ancient India that are implicitly represented in these art objects. The early studies of dancing images often focused on two aspects of the dance representation in sculptures, one being the interpretation of the meanings of dance from the viewpoint of iconography, pioneered by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, and the other being the identification of the dancing postures of sculptures and paintings with reference to the *karaṇas*, advanced by Venkata Narayanaswami Naidu, Srinivasulu Naidu and Venkata Rangayya Pantulu. Missing from these studies is an approach to explain the holistic features of dancing images in the representation of fine arts. The awareness of the varied and implicit phases of those images could help us to understand the culture of India nurtured within the temple. On the basis of systematic analysis and comprehensive observation, dancing images in India could serve as effective sources through which to investigate Indian temple, the fine arts, and as yet unknown facets in the heritage of dance tradition as living culture. This offers a promising area for future research.

## Notes

- 1) Other studies include those by Subrahmanyam (1979), Anne-Marie Gaston (1982), Sadasivam (1985) and Nandagopal (1990).
- 2) The chronology is based on S. R. Balasubrahmanyam (1979).
- 3) The panels studied are sometimes so damaged that the sex of some figures cannot be identified. In these cases, the figure is indicated simply as “human figure.”
- 4) Arjuna is often represented as a hermaphrodite dancer in the temples of this period. His dancing posture is distinguished from those seen in other dancing figures. For more details of this image, see Fukuroi (1997).
- 5) For more details and symbolism of these images, see Kalidos (1989, 1990).

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