



## CHAPTER 3

**THE SOLO DANCE AND THE DANCER  
AS HIGHLIGHTED IN SANSKRIT *KAVYA*  
*SHILAPADIKARAM*,  
AND OTHER LITERATURE.**



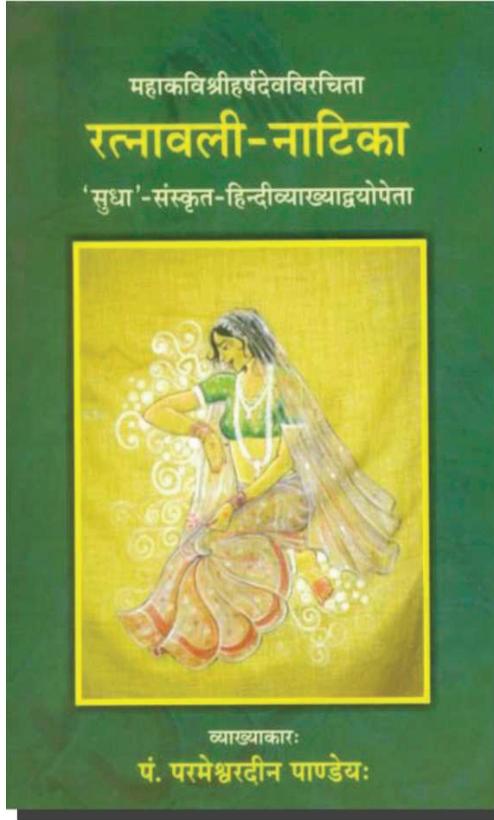
Moving further from Natyashastra and other Sanskrit texts, we search further to establish the important existence of a solo dancer and her dance. There are several literary texts, some which go back to the time of the Natyashastra, which show the female protagonist and/or the antagonist as trained as accomplished dancers. They are emotionally and physically mature and strong, often living independent lives, taking their own decisions, earning their own living. These texts have survived over centuries, popular with the masses as well as critics, often bestowing heroic stature to their dancer-heroines.

In addition to its various human characters, dance features as an important presence in these stories, often being a common thread that weaves the plot, sub-plots, and characters together in a riveting whole. In many of these literary texts there are elaborate descriptions of dance performances. In a number of these ancient texts, the chief protagonist, or even an important supporting female character, is a trained, often professional dancer, or may be someone with a natural talent for dance. In such stories, a dance performance becomes the most important episode on which the story rests or takes a dramatic turn. In addition to literary texts penned by authors, there are hundreds of sub-stories, myths, legends, oral versions of the numerous Indian epics, interpreted by different writers in various languages and at various points in time. They are in mainstream as well as tribal and regional traditions that feature dancers as primary if not important secondary characters. It is these epics and religious texts that have been and are a significant source of the *sahitya* on which choreographers and composers have based their performances. As a result, they often described in detail, dance techniques and performances, rituals related to dance, social relevance of dance and dancers, the challenges and joys of dancers and their lives. They are a source to support and sustain the existence of a solo dancer.

### **LITERARY TEXTS**

Dance theorist and historian Mandakranta Bose has identified terms such as, *lasya*, *kavya*, *nrittakavya*, *chalika*, *samyā*, *dvipadi*, *sangitak* etc., used in a familiar way in several popular works of literature. She writes, “The dance was indeed an evolving art is apparent in textual references. Dramatists and authors like Kalidasa, Vararuci, Bhavabhuti, Harsha, Rajasekhara, Damodara Gupta, Jayanta Bhatta and Alamkarikas

such as Dandin, Bhamaha, Bhoja, Sharadatanaya, Sagaranandin and several others use a number of terms to denote dances that use body movements to express ideas and emotions. These are absent in Bharata's work, which suggest that they are later developments, which in turn suggests a broadening of the art of dancing."<sup>1</sup> References to dance and dancing are found in several major and minor Sanskrit literary texts.

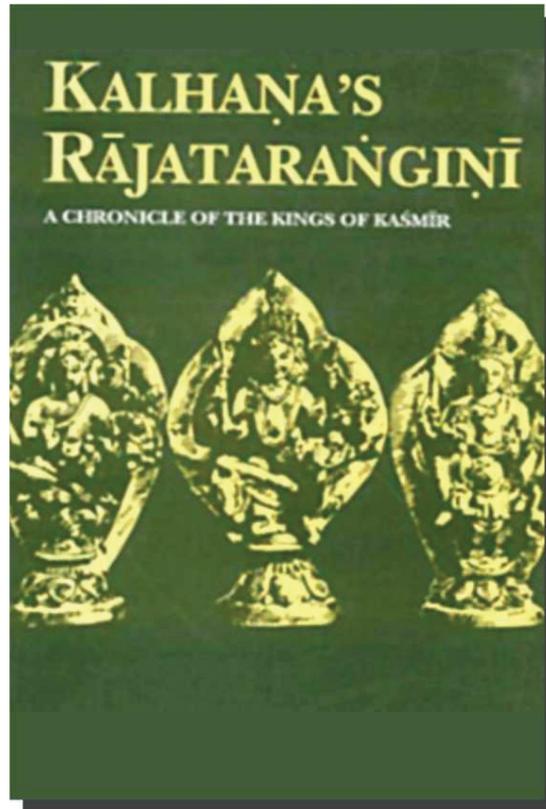


(Fig. 1: *Ratnavali Natika* )

In the olden days, a number of kings and members of the royal family were artists and authors themselves, and many took serious interest in the performing arts as well. Amongst these, in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century, King Harshavardhana of Kanauj wrote a play, *Ratnavali Natika*. He describes the Holi festival which is celebrated with an elaborate dance. It appears to have a folk rather than classical base. Obviously, this king must have encouraged the practice of the performance arts in his court. Raja Harsha of Kashmir also appears to be a serious patron of dance performance that can be seen from references to the same in the 11<sup>th</sup> century text, *Rajatarangini*.

This is a very significant text as it offers historical documentation of the known dancer named 'Kamala of Paundravardhan' who is believed to have been attached to the local Kartikeya temple, as well as two other dancers, 'Sahaja' and 'Kayya' attached to other temples. Scholars have established *Rajatarangini* as a holistic text that offers incisive and extensive documentation of the technical prowess that the dance form had achieved during those times, the well-known dancers and dance teachers and musicians of that era, as well as the deep relationship that dance had developed with temples. Written around the same time, Kshemendra's *Brhatkathamajari* is another text which deals in depth with several performance-

related issues. This text uses as its focus the life and times of King Chakravarmana (923-933 AD), around which it explores the stories of dancers and the teaching of dance practices conducted in the temple premises of the teachers' homes.



**Fig. 2: Kalhana's *Rajatarangini***

From this book, it appears that the concept of '*tandava*' as performance of male dancers and '*lasya*' as that of female dancers was prevalent in northern India till almost the 13<sup>th</sup> century. However, while the above discussed texts have some kind of relationship to the local ruler, Bana's *Harshacharita* is a tome in the same genre but with no reference to any ruler. Encyclopedic in the range of dance-related subjects that it covers, it describes and discusses every dance form prevalent and popular. He writes on all aspects of training and performance, the well-known dancers and dance teachers, musicians and musical instruments used as accompanists, and so on. There is even a discussion on the fact that while *tala* is inherently important to dance performance, the role which the dancer's anklets play in making sure that the performer keeps the beat! Perhaps this is also indicative that pure dance – *nritta* – was

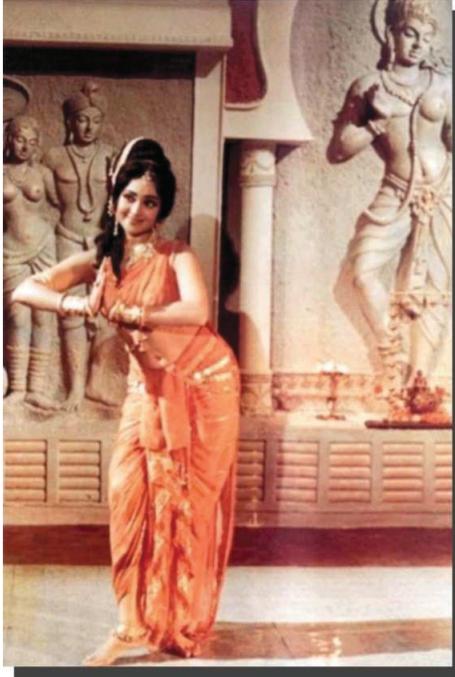
a significant part of a performance. However, the most important part of this book is its contribution to the understanding of content and the whole environment of dance. It describes in great detail the five types of *Goshthis* –*kavyagoshthi*, *galpagoshthi*, *gitagoshthi*, *natyagoshthi*, and *vadyagoshthi*.



**Fig 3. Kalakshetra Ramayana Series by Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundel**

Some of the most important references of classical Indian dance are found in the Indian epics – *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Puranas*, and other religious and secular

Sanskrit texts. We can easily say that if we were to trace a history of the evolution of classical dance in praxis, it is found here. The detailed and realistic descriptions of the performer, the performance and the socio-cultural environment in which both flourished are presented in these stories with such confidence, that not only can we conclude that dance existed in those times but that there were already two kinds of dance styles – the classical and the popular. The understanding of dance and the nuances of performance were a part of the holistic education of young boys and girls from royal and noble families. This was so even when accomplishment in this art was the life goal of the *ganika* – the courtesan.



Courtesans were trained in both classical dance and vocal music, sometimes even in playing instruments. The most talented amongst them, such as Amrapali from *Budhha Jatak Katha*, became the subject of legends, remembered many centuries later to this day. It is believed their performances were very popular and accordingly the fees they charged were very high as well. It is also correctly believed that if true classical traditions survived innumerable invasions on India by foreigners, it was only because the powerful oral traditions were kept safe and alive in the homes of these courtesans and their descendants. Scholars have identified 10 varieties of *nritya* performances that may have been popular in ancient times and that we can recognize today. (Fig 4. Smt. Vyjantimala Bali as Courtesan in *Amrapali* Movie)

Their names are indicative of the type of dance and their tempo. Dancing is also mentioned in Jain Literature. Total thirty-two types of dances are mentioned. Out of the thirty-two, these ten varieties where *nritya* was performed. These are<sup>3</sup>:

1. *Drutanritya*
2. *Vilambitanritya*
3. *Drutavilambitanritya*

4. *Anchiya (anchita) nritya*
5. *Ribhitanritya*
6. *Anchita-ribhitanritya*
7. *Arabhada (drabhata) nritya*
8. *Bhasolanritya*
9. *Arbhada-bhasolanritya*
10. *Uppayanivayapavatta (utpda and nitpda), sahkunchiya (sankuchita), pasariya(prasdrita), raydraiya (khecarita), bhdnta (bhrdnta) and sambhdnta (sam-bhrdntd) nritya*



**Fig. 5: Lucknow Courtesans**

"In *Kathasaritasagara*, Somadeva recounts the story of *Ishvaravarman*, who sees a beautiful *devadasi* dancing in a temple at Kanchanpura (not to be confused with Kanchipuram). In Sanskrit *kavya* literature and *natya* literature there are often fabulous descriptions of dance performances. These are described by their author in highly technical terms, which means that they understood the subtleties of dance expression and used it carefully to reinforce the overall dramatic content of their stories, in addition to being factually correct<sup>4</sup>."

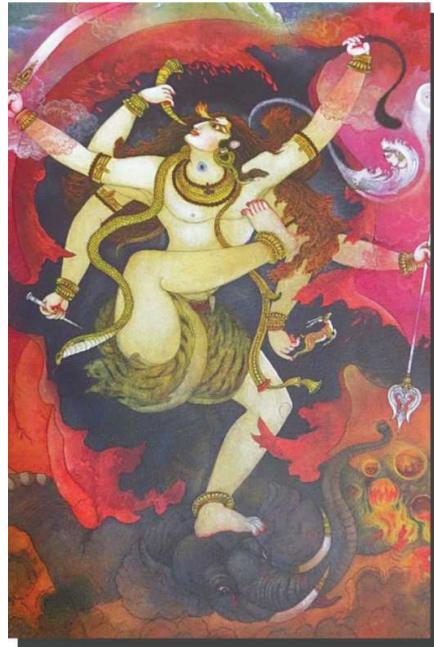
### **DANCE IN KALIDASA'S WORKS**

However, both *kavya* and *natya* literature comprises dramatic verse that lends itself easily to dance interpretation. The poet-dramatists like Kalidasa were extremely well-versed in understanding the principles of dance as codified in the *Natyashastra* and other texts. In fact, Kalidasa's entire body of literary work is highly embellished by wonderful and correct references to and descriptions of music and dance. According to Shri G S Ghurye, "Outside Bharata's *Natyashastra*, the earliest

reference to dance showing technical knowledge and by implication giving other important information is that which occurs in Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra*...it has to be pointed out that barring accounts in *Natyashastra* and the *puranas*, Kalidasa appears to be the earliest writer to make a pointed reference to the daily evening dance of Siva...in his *Meghadutam* Siva requires an elephant's 'blood-dripping' hide which he holds with two of his hands over his head while dancing. Siva's dance with this particular equipment has been sculptured in South Indian temples from about the 7th century onwards..."<sup>5</sup>



**Fig. 6: Kavi Kalidasa**



**Fig.7: Shiva Dancing on the elephant head**

Kalidasa's *Rutusamhara* is a fine example of *kavya* literature (poetry-based in content) but his *Malavikagnimitra*, is an example of *natya* (drama-based content) literature. In another not very well-known work by Kalidasa, *Vikramorvasiya*, the celestial dancer, Urvashi performs and enacts the eight major *rasa-s* with aplomb. This work also reveals how well and in minute detail Kalidasa understood classical dance and music. The most appropriate similes that he uses in his famous works, *Meghadootam* and *Rutusamhara*, not only establish his imaginative use of language but also his deep understanding of dance gestures and terminology. For instance, in *Meghdootam*, there are elaborate descriptions of dances performed by the Ujjain

women and the grace of women dancing in Alakapuri. The sounds of thunder and impending rain that send the peacocks in a dance of frenzy. In his other work *Raghuvamsa*, Kalidasa moves beyond just the description of a human figure dancing, to eloquently comparing the grace of climbing creepers to the hands of a dancer as it moves in gesture, and the melodious humming of the bees as equivalent to accompanying music. In a truly extraordinary simile, Kalidasa even compares the movements of branches of a young mango tree to that of a bashful young dancer just starting to learn *abhinaya*!



**Fig 8. Kanyaviday Dance Drama By Prof. Dr. Parul Shah and Group,  
Department of Dance, M.S.University of Baroda**

In *Abhijnanashakuntal*, Kalidasa's seminal work, the poet's stage directions are very meticulous. They illustrate the care taken to make sure that the play was performed correctly and exactly as Kalidasa wanted it to. What is however most interesting is his creative adaptation of dance *hastas* and movements to express what is physically not possible to show on stage. In *Indian Classical Dance*, Dr. KapilaVatsyayan explains this thus. "In the *Abhijnanashakuntal*, at the very beginning we have Dushyanta entering the stage as if riding a chariot. We can easily infer that the movement of riding the chariot was depicted through *angikabhinaya*. Dushyanta is after the deer and the whole process is described with *angikabhinaya*. The deer is

represented not by an actual deer but by a dancer wearing a deer mask, the movement possibly the *harinapluta* movement. The *karana* is derived from *atikrantachari*. A pair of *katakamukhahands* of the *Natyashastra*, are crossed at the wrists.”<sup>6</sup> There are also numerous examples of stage direction given in terms of dance movements identified by Dr. Vatsyayan.

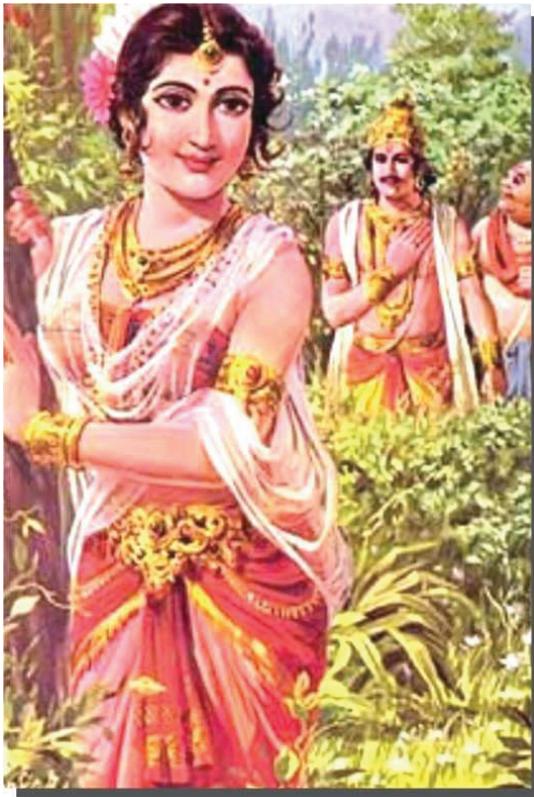


**Fig 9. Kanyavidya Dance Drama By Prof. Dr. Parul Shah and Group,  
Department of Dance, M.S.university of Baroda**

There was a tradition, perhaps oral, that resulted in the codification of the performing arts in the *Natyashastra*. The holistic nature of this book included not just the performing arts, but also poetry and literature as essential elements. So, in *drashya-kavya* or theatre/drama, stage technique translates as the *angika abhinaya* of classical dance. Authors of *kavya* literature often followed the Vedic and Epic traditions of content, theme and philosophical concepts that strengthened their narratives. In keeping with this, the main characters who peopled the narrative were generally supernatural beings – heroes of epic proportions blessed with superhuman powers or gods with modified attributes. They interacted with *apsaras* and *ganikas* on the stage, but they were not like the Grecian heroes with the tragic flaw or who became instruments of Fate that led to their downfall. Generally, the god invoked by the classical writers was Shiva whose cosmic dance symbolized the universe in its many

aspects. The *apsaras*, celestial dancers of many talents, often played crucial roles in the unfolding of the Indian epics.

Kalidasa also obviously had to choose actors who were fine dancers themselves, especially masterful in *abhinaya*, so that they played their roles to perfection. *Kavya* literature is full of examples that illustrate this deep understanding that the writers had of the technical aspects of music and dance even though they may not have any direct relationship with them. There are not just references to formal dance performances in the court or the temple, but several opportunities for social or folk dancing, the courtesan's dance, and so on. It thus establishes a strong reference for *Natyashastra*'s



detailed descriptions of various prevalent styles of dancing. The occasion of Raghu or Lord Rama's birth in the poem-play, *Raghuvamsa* (III.19), is celebrated in the streets of Ayodhya by folk dancing, and in the *havelis* by joyous dances by courtesans. Such dancing is described as *mangalanritya* and *pramodanritya*. It spreads joy all over the world and touches the shores of heaven itself!

**(Fig. 10 Malvikagnimitra By Kalidasa)**

One must understand that during the time of Kalidasa, society had evolved significantly in the cultural domain, with great refinement of language, polished social behavior, and a highly developed taste in and understanding of drama, dance and music. Viewers and audiences were well-informed, academically incisive and rigorously critical. No author dared to deviate from what the *Natyashastra* had penned down and that learned tradition was followed meticulously.

The author-poet was also the perfect stage-craftsman, a sharp dramatist who knew the value of time and audience patience. But where the theme of dance is concerned, *Malavikagnimitra* is Kalidasa's masterpiece. The story here is imaginary, situated in 150 BC in the court of King Pushyamitra, a patron of the performing arts. This allows for Kalidasa to introduce the formal auditorium (*Prekshagraha*) and rehearsal rooms into the script as the imaginary sets. The content itself is replete with several detailed technical references to the performance and its challenges to the dancer. This is obviously because the central female character, Malavika, is an accomplished dancer and her performance is the central focus of the poem-play. Hence there are several descriptions of the various items she selects as part of her repertory, the skill of the music accompanists – singers and instrumentalists, and above all, the electrifying beauty of her own performance. As a result, several supporting characters are also intimately connected to the practice of dance. There are two dance masters, Haradatta (patronized by the king) and Ganadasa (patronized by the queen). They are referred to as *natyacharya*, *abhinayacharya* and *nartayita* while their work is *natya*, *abhinaya vidhya* and *Shilpa*. The dancer is referred to as *patra* (as per *Natyashastra* and *Sagitanarayana*). Like most dance teachers, Haradatta and Ganadasa were accomplished dancers themselves, trained in a strong dance tradition and technically perfect. They understood well the principles and differences in theory (*vidya* or *sastra*) and praxis (*prayoga*). They were adept in the theoretical understanding of dance as well. In fact it is Ganadasa who ascribes the *tandava* and *lasya* aspects of dance to the Ardhanarishwara form of Shiva. "... Ganadasa, the dance-master of Malavika informs us that Malavika was very quick of understanding and dexterous in practice of expressive movement ('*bhavikam*'). We have to understand that the dance master explained to Malavika, the gestures, postures and movements which together, forming the configurations, could convey to the audience the notion and experience of a particular state of mind ('*bhava*'). Malavika, on her part, immediately grasped them and not only reproduced without blemish the instruction in her performance but also improved on it in her manner of actually executing the configurations and creating the attendant emotional atmosphere. Later, Ganadasa says that he had just instructed Malavika on '*panchangabhinaya*', representative gestures and postures of the five limbs. This is exactly the wording of Bharata *Natyashastra*."<sup>7</sup>

In Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra* there is a unique reference, the most valuable for the present purpose the solo dance recital. Malavika's performance is a perfectly executed classical solo dance number. Her execution of *nritya* and *abhinaya* is flawless, and as if the author's evaluation is not enough, Kalidasa imaginatively places an objective spectator – *parivrajika* – in the audience to critically comment on the performance. *Malavikagnimitra* opens with Bakula valika going to *guru* Ganadasa to enquire how Malavika has progressed in learning the dance '*chalika*'. In subsequent acts we learn more not only about this particular composition, but also about dance in general, and see how accurately this dance training conforms to the theoretical canons of dancing. Malavika then appears on the stage in the *sausthava* position (*sarvanga-saiisthava*), a pose from which a dance performance always begins, a pose that demonstrates complete control and balance. She sings an *upasana* and then does the *abhinaya* to the song. The *abhinaya* is significant for its perfection and everyone applauds the performance. The composition and structure of the verse to which she dances is the *chatush-pada* and the dance '*chalika*' is described by the commentator Katayavamaas. It is the dance in which the dancer, while acting the part of another, succeeds in expressing his or her own real feelings. *Malavikagnimitra* provides other important examples of space manipulation and zonal treatment of the stage, as also significant stage directions for *angikabhinaya*. While Malvika's dance recital is the most finished and refined presentation of classical dance technique, it was distinctly different from the popular group dances of the time and was rather like contemporary dance performance in which the dancer is a solo performer depicting the emotions of various characters. With a combination of deft footwork, expressive hand and eye movements, mobile facial expressions, her dance was performed to the perfect accompaniment of song and *tala*.

Kalidasa's description in *Malavikagnimitra* (2-6) of a lady standing with her left hand resting on her hip and the right hand hanging loosely by her side is reminiscent of the Dancing Girl figurine from the Mohenjo-Daro excavations.



**Fig. 11: Smt. Seema Kermani as Dancing girl figure from Mohenjo- Daro**

He mentions that even while the dancer is motionless, she looks much more attractive than when she is dancing. Kalidasa's poetic imagination allowed him a far more deeper understanding of movement and its expressive possibilities. It is believed that when Kalidasa saw plants and leaves fluttering in the gentle breeze, it reminded him of a bunch of girls dancing together! Examples of such thinking are apparent in *Shakuntal* and *Vikramorvasiyam*.

In addition to Kalidasa, there were numerous poet-dramatists of that time and the following decades, whose writings reflected their skill not just with language and narrative but also their understanding of dance, as dancer-heroines were a popular choice for the leading characters of their poems. Sudraka's well-known and extremely popular play, *Mricchakatikam*, has at its centre the courtesan Vasantsena, a gifted dancer. Her walk was so graceful that even such prosaic movement was described in dance terms. The Kashmiri poet Somadeva's epic work, *Kathasaritasagara* (11<sup>th</sup> century), has two dancer-*devadasis* at the focus of the narrative -- Sundari of Kanchanpura and Rupanika of Mathura. Dancers seducing holy *rishis* and monks, distracting them from their dedication to meditation and other spiritual practices have also been the crux of many storylines.

Jinavallabha, who penned the *Sanghapattaka*, often featured dancers performing in temples and practising with dance teachers. This literary work has many light moments describing the tricks devised by the mischievous younger dancers disturbing monks at prayer in the Jain *derasars* dotting Rajasthan. The descriptions of dance performances by these authors are also highly detailed and outstandingly explained – these include Madhavi’s *arangetram* in *Silappadikaram*, Malavika’s *Sabha nritya* in *Malvikagnimitra*, and Bruhanalla’s dance (Arjuna in disguise) in King Virata’s palace in *Mahabharata*.

### **SILAPPADIKARAM: THE SEMINAL TAMIL TEXT**

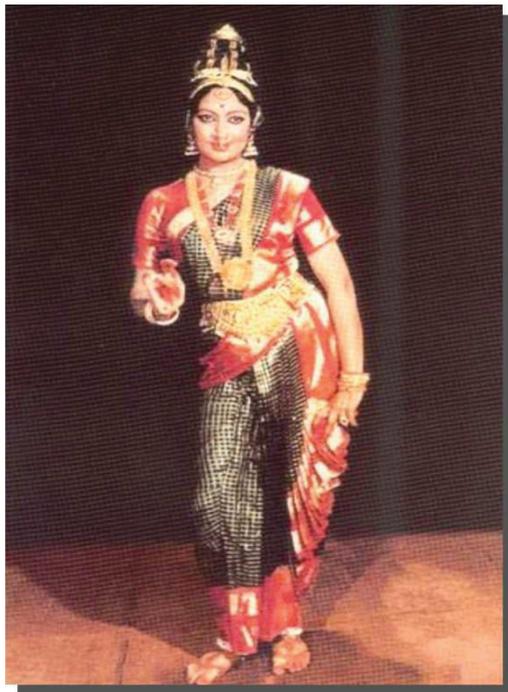
*Silappadikaram* by Prince Ilango is one of the most important and influential literary texts from the south. Believed to be one of the three surviving oldest epic-poems in the world, it was written in the Sangam Age, towards the end of the third primeval epoch of Tamil literature. While the poem is a literary masterpiece, it is also an invaluable encyclopaedia of cultural information that allows us an understanding of thinking of those times --- in socio-political-economic terms. The epic refers to legends from the *Puranas*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, while giving detailed historical accounts of the Pandyan, Chera and Chola dynasties that ruled south India.



**Fig. 12. Ankle bell of *Silappadikaram***

The epic unfolds as a romantic trilogy between a married couple, Kovalan, Kannagi, and Madhavi who is Kovalan's mistress. Madhavi is a very well-known dancer in the kingdom, the daughter of Chitrapathy and from the dancer community.

It is also believed that Madhavi is the daughter of the *apsara*, Urvashi. Madhavi is a talented dancer who learnt to dance from the age of five and mastered classical dance by the time she was twelve. Her performance at the annual Indra Festival at Kaveri Pumpattinam, the ancient Chola Port city earned her a Royal Medal and 1008 gold coins from a very pleased king. Kovalan who is watching the dance and is a true *rasika*, falls in love with her. But Kovalan is already married and so begins a complex narrative that engenders several stories within stories and in the process, raises important issues related to marriage and relationships, moral and ethical values, religion and rituals, myths and magic, caste and language, visual and



performing arts, military tactics and political strategies, family and nation. The priceless lessons taught are that the law of divinity steps in as the figure of death at the time when a king becomes extremely negligent of his duties, a faithful wife needs to be collectively respected, fate does its work in a fully mysterious manner, and that all the activities are honoured as per their nature.

**(Fig.13: Dr. Padma Subramaniam AS Madhavi in Silappadikaram)**

*Silappadikaram* is also a very important text because it offers theories on the legendary origin of dancing. Once in the Sabha of Indra, his son Jayantha is said to have misbehaved with the celestial dancer Urvashi. This enraged sage Agastya who cursed him to be born as a bamboo stick in the Vindhya Hills and Urvashi as a courtesan on the earth. Urvashi was to be freed from the curse on being presented with the '*talaikkol*', which was symbolic of Jayantha, on her Arangetral day. The

*talaikkol* was usually the central shaft of a white umbrella captured in the battlefield from monarchs of great repute and symbolical of Jayantha. Thus Jayantha is celebrated in the ceremony and worship of ‘*talaikkol*’. According to *Silappadikaram* the dance master must be able to choreograph harmoniously the various kinds of *purak koothu* with the 14 types of *vilakku* or songs. Besides, he should have thorough mastery over the eleven types of dances from *Alliyam* to *Kodu kotti*.



**Fig. 14 : Madhavi is in the court**

These eleven types are, *Alliyam*, *Kodukotti*, *Kudaj*, *Kudam*, *Pedi*, *Kadayam*, *Pandarangam*, *Mal*, *Tudi*, *Marakkal* and *Pavai*. The dances referred to are those performed by Shiva, Muruga, Kama, Durga, Krishna, Lakshmi and Indrani. Madhavi performed eleven different types of dances according to the epic. They are:

1. *Alliam*: A dance about Lord Krishna’s victory over the mad elephant.
2. *Kodukotti*: The dance of Lord Shiva performed after burning the triple cities of asuras/demons
3. *Kudai*: *Kudaiis* about Lord Skanda’s victory over the demons
4. *Kudam*: Kannan performed this after winning the release of his grandson Anirudh from the prison of Banasura.

5.*Pandarangam*: Brahma was entertained by Shiva with this dance after Shiva's win over the triple cities of demons.

6.*Mal*: This Dance describes the wrestling contest between Bana and Lord Krishna.

7.*Thudi*: Skanda's dance after defeating the demon Suran.

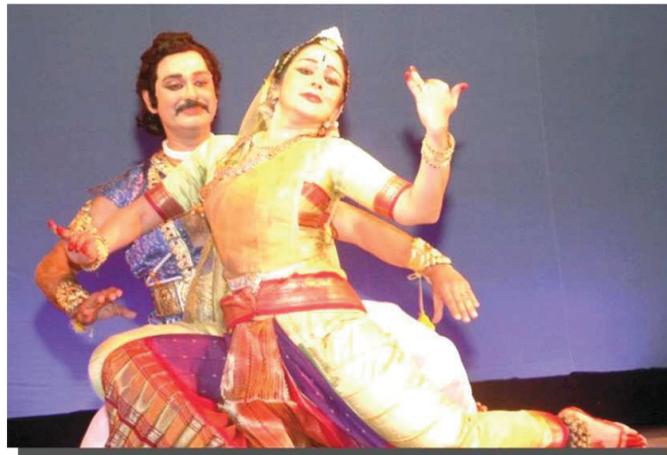
8.*Kadayam*: The dance performed by Indrani at the north gate of palace of Banasura.

9.*Pedu*: Manmathan's dance dressed as a eunuch to secure the release of his son Anirudh.

10.*Marakkal*: When demons sent poisonous creatures like snakes and scorpions against Goddess Durga she danced with stilts (Stick dance). This is known as *Marakkal*, literally "wooden legs".

11.*Pavai*: Goddess Lakshmi's dance against the warring demons.

The first six of the eleven dances are done in standing position and the rest five are performed in lying position. There is an interesting thread that runs through all these mythological episodes. This is about a fight between the good and bad and the ultimate victory of good over evil.



**Fig. 15** A scene from "*Silappadikaram* — Tale of Puhar" by Shri Muralidharan and Uma Muralikrishna

In *Silappadikaram*, Madhavi is in the line of descent of Urvashi and is also called Vanavamakal (divine woman). This is part of the strong belief that the south Indian temple dancers, the *devdasis* hold often claiming descent from *apsaras* such as Urvashi, Rambha and so on but the fact that there was a strong link between the Temple and the Court vis-a-vis the presentation of dance was also established by this text. Madhavi's *arangetram* is performed before the king in his *ranga*. She later performs in the Indra Festival, indicating that her dance was associated with temple worship as well. *Silappadikaram* makes many references to performance-related terms such as *natya*, *ranga*, *pindi*, *varam*, *karanam*, *mandala*. Some technical dance terms are in Tamil as well suggesting that the principles expounded in the *Natyashastra* were well-integrated in regional practices of dance also at that time. This means that there were other types of women who danced (non-*devdasis*) and *Silappadikaram* refers to them as well. These included –*kaval ganika* (women guards), *kalattiladumkutti* (dancers in the military camp), *adalkuttis* (dancers who performed *ahakkuttu* or *sringara* dances like *padams*), and so on. "It appears that by the time of the *Silappadikaram* the three-fold classification of dancing girls as *ganikas*, *kuttis* and *adalsiladi* – corresponding to the later classification *taliyilar*, *patiyilar* and *devaradiyal* – had come into vogue."<sup>8</sup>

Here Madhavi's *arangetram* is described in great detail. The author gives enough if not more importance to the proficiency of Madhavi's dance teacher and his skill as a choreographer, singer, musician, and his deep knowledge of the principles of stage management. Two distinct dance types, prevalent in that era, the *Aham* (*Ahakuttu*) and *Puram* (*Purakuttu*) are also classified in *Silappadikaram*. Under *Ahakuttu*, six twin concepts are explained: *Vasai* (satire) and *Pugal*(praise), *Vettiyal* (performed before kings) and *Poduviyal* (performed before ordinary people), *Vari* and *Vari Shanti*, *Shanti* and *Vinodham*, *Aryam*. Further *ShantiKuttu* was divided into *Chokkam* or *SuddhaNrttam* (pure dance, later *nritta*) and incorporated the 108 *karanas*. The other was *Mei Kuttu* which incorporated *Desi*, *Vadugu* and *Singalam*. It had three divisions – *SamaKuttu*, *VanmaiKuttu* (*tandava*) and *MenmaiKuttu* (*lasya*). Under *PuraKuttu*, come three modes – *Perunatai*, *Charyay*, and *Bhramari*. *Silappadikaram* is also a significant text. Even though it is really an epic poem with a storyline, it has really extensive chapters devoted to dance and its different aspects -- dance

(*ArangetruKadai*), music and musical instruments (*KadaladuKadai*, *Konalvari*, *VenirKadai*, *ArchiyarKuravai*).

According to scholar Dr. R Kalarani, "*Silappadikaram* ... gives a comprehensive picture in the *Aranketrukkadai*. The work is a happy blend of *muttamil - iyal*, *isai* and *natakam*. This has been praised as a treatise on ancient Tamil music and dance and is a mine of information on dance, instruments, musicians and stage art.



**Fig 16 Madhavi is in the court**

She maintains that the Tamil tradition seems to run parallel to the Sanskrit tradition. The eleven kinds of *koothus* performed as solo dances are believed to have been very popular during this period. *Silappadikaram* gives a detailed account of the eleven kinds of dances and *kuravai kootus* of the *aaichiyar*. Madhavi performs all of them in the *aranketrukadai*. These dances are ascribed to different *gods*. The dances of *kodukotti* and *pandarangam* are sacred to Siva, *Tudi* to Murugan, *Marakkal* to Korravai, *Pavai* to Lakshmi and *Kadayam* to Indrani. Dance varieties like *Marakkal*, *Pavaikootu*, *Kodukotti* are popular to this day, for example *kudamadal(karagattam)* and *marakkaladal* (dummy horse dance). These dances are now classified as folk arts."<sup>8</sup>



**Fig.17 Madhavi As Dancer in Sketch**

In Canto Three (*Arangerrukadai*) of the epic, there are exhaustive descriptions of the accompaniments and accompanists required in the teaching and performing of dance. It adds to the understanding of the support systems that a solo dancer requires and which were available in that day and age. These are relevant to us today as well. For instance, the teacher who trains Madhavi was an expert in the two kinds of dance. He knew how to attune the rhythm of the body to the flow of the song. He taught the rules that keep the eleven positions of the breasts independent from the movement of the limbs. He knew the words of every song and could play every instrument. He was a faultless master of movements, gesture, composition, and rhythm. He knew which gestures should be made with one or with both hands, which movements are used for mime, and which belong to dance.

*Silappadikaram* did not stop with Madhavi's *arangetral*. In three other places in the epic, there are descriptions of the hunters' dance during worship of Durga, cowherds' dance praising Lord Krishna, and a tribal dance. While describing the *vettuvvari* (hunter's song) it explains, "Salini born of the clan of Maravar began her dance with appropriate gesture and became possessed of divinity, her hairs standing on ends, her hands raised aloft; she continued to dance moving from place to place to the wonder of the foresters.... she then proclaimed these unfulfilled vows".

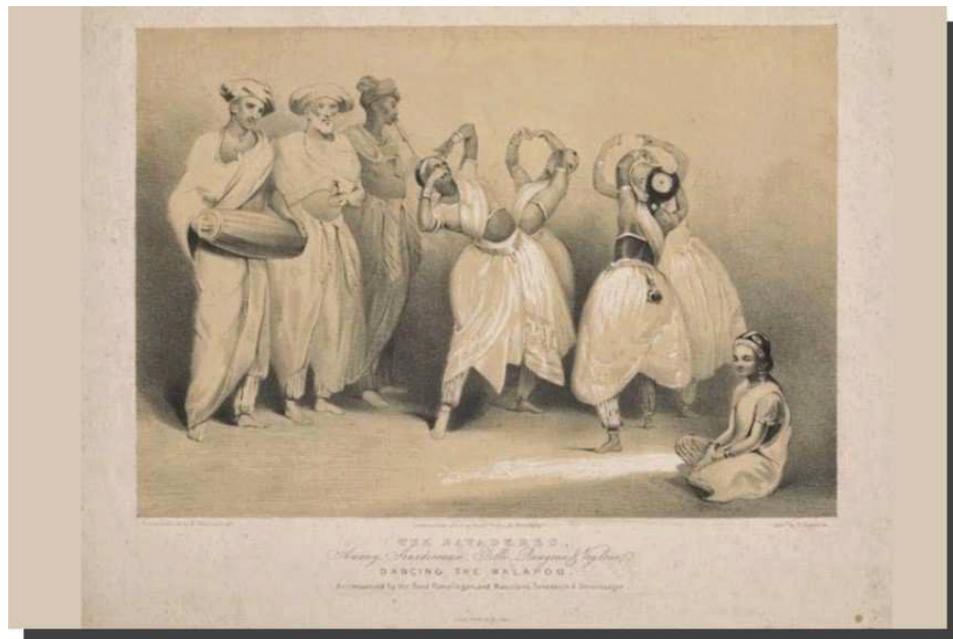
According to V. Raghavan, this dance form survives among the Tamils of Batticola of east Sri Lanka. This also finds a strong parallel to the invocatory dance prevailing among the *vedas*(hunters) of Sri Lanka preparatory to the setting out on a hunting expedition. A number of dances related to rituals and ceremonies of specific communities have also been recorded by literary texts. This indicates that these dances were popularly known, performed and their significance was widely accepted. Amongst these, the *karakam* dance performed with a decorated pot skilfully balanced on the head was part of the cult of Mariamman. Mariamman is a popular Goddess propitiated to ward off epidemic diseases. She is also worshipped as a rain Goddess, where the pot plays a symbolic role. The *kavadiattam* dance is traditionally performed as a step dance with the ceremonial offering of the *kavadi* to Lord Muruga. It is modelled after the dancing peacock, the sacred vehicle of Muruga.



**Fig. 18. Madhvi As Dancer in Painting**

## TRAVELOGUES BY FOREIGNERS AND WHAT THEY DOCUMENT

In addition to religious, secular and literary texts, there are several accounts of travellers from all parts of the world who visited ancient, medieval and colonial India and have written detailed accounts of what they saw and experienced in the course of their travels. These often included dancers and their dancing. In addition to these travelogues, there are also temple records, inscriptions and government reports and gazettes.



**Fig. 19: Devadasi-s Dancing with Musician**

They recorded the occasions on which dances have been performed, the social customs associated with dance activity, the difference in professional and folk dances, and sometimes, the economic and political necessity for Courts to support dancers. Since dancing was chiefly associated with temples, texts or manuals describing temple rituals offer important information on why and when dance was performed in the temples, its significance as a part of the temple ritual, how temples supported dancers and so on. Government reports and gazettes are also important documentary evidences of the legal status of the dancers and the regulations that applied to them.



**Fig.20 : Madurai Kamalambal during one of her performances.**

Abu Zeid Al Hasan an Arab traveler, mentioned dancing girls attached to temples in 867 AD. Another traveler, also probably from an Arab country Al-Beruni in his work has referred to dancers performing in temples. He interpreted that the dancers in temples in north India were "they were revenue-earners for the kings as they were a major attraction in the cities."<sup>10</sup>

Al Beruni also observed that the king made dancers of temples an attraction in North India. With the opening of sea routes to India from Europe, a number of European travelers came to India from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards. They wrote travelogues describing what they experienced and saw. Their documentation gave an objective and important view of the role that dance and dancers played in the cultural and social life of India. Tavernier, was the first one who extensively toured especially the Deccan region of South India. According to his interpretation the dancing girls created an indirect source of revenue for the rulers. The dancing girls 'promoted' heavy consumption and as liquor was taxed in most south Indian kingdoms. He describes them as courtesans with no connection to temples and observed that there were about 20,000 dancers in this area.



**Fig.21 : Devadasi in Karnataka during Festival Time**

A French missionary Abbe Jean Antoine Dubois, traveled to India from 1792-1823. He wrote a book, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*. The book describes the dancing and singing in temples which were done at fixed times. Its focus was on temples, festivals and their rituals. He observed the fact that every important temple had at least 10-12 *devadasis* attached to it. One important descriptive note in his writings is the description of a festival at Tirupati is Lord Venkatesvara procession. He observed that the temple priests selected the most beautiful women to serve as new dancing girls in the temple from amongst those who had come to watch. He described the popular Pongal festival of Tamil Nadu where dancing was done. Fray Sebastien Manrique recorded a Durga procession led by a vast troupe of dancing girls in his book, *Travels of Fray S. Manrique*. The legendary traveler Marco Polo, visited the Malabar coast, when he came to India. According to his interpretation, the dances of the *devadasis* were to encourage sexual union between gods and goddesses. It ensured prosperity and good harvests in the region. Dr. Francis Hamilton-Buchanan who wrote *Journey from Madras through Mysore, Kanara and Malabar*, in 3 volumes in 1807, identified two important temples at Kanchipuram with more than 100 dancing girls attached to them.



**Fig.22 : Devadasi from SouthIndia**

A lady missionary, Amy Wilson-Carmichael, describes in her book, *Things As They Are*, (1904) how *devadasis* were carefully selected and how attractiveness was a prized characteristic. Robert Sewell wrote and published in 1900, *A Forgotten Empire* (Vijaynagar). Here in he describes a city and a temple of Ganesha (pagoda). Here is the account in the narrative the dance of the women in front of the image. He writes that these women had expensive lifestyles and their daughters belonged to the temple.

Most importantly, he describes what must have been Dancing School in the King's Palace (Chap 15, The Chronicles letters, pg 288 The Sculptured Hall for the Dancing): "There is a Hall where the king sends his women to be taught to dance. On the wall panels of the hall, there are human images seated on the elephant, as well as those of all dancing women having little drums... The designs of these panels show the positions at the end of dances in such a way that on each panel there is a dancer in the proper position at the end of the dance; this is to teach the women, so that if they forget the position in which they have to remain when the dance is done, they may look at one of the panels which shows the end of that dance. By that they keep in mind what they have to do... At the end of this, house on the left hand is a painted recess where the women cling on with their hands in order better to stretch and

loosen their bodies and legs;there they teach them to make the whole body supple, in order to make their dancing more graceful...in the middle of the wall is a golden image of a woman...with arms in the position which she occupies in the end of the dance."



**Fig. 23: Sashimoni - *Devadasi* from Odisa**

### **GOVERNMENT GAZETTES AND REPORTS AS DOCUMENTATION**

Then there are Government Reports and Gazettes that authentically document happenings of importance in various parts of the country. They also write laws and regulations passed by the Government. When the Queen took over as Empress of India from the East India Company after 1857, these documents have been meticulously maintained by the British. Regional government reports of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and legislative debates of 1922 reported the existence of large troupes of temple dancers in Assam, the Madras Presidency and at the Jagannath temple in Orissa. However Bengal, Sind, United Provinces (present-day UP), and Gujarat did not have temples supporting dancers.



**Fig. 24: 1920s photograph of two Devadasis in Tamil Nadu, South India.**

The Journal of the Madras Music Academy (JMMA), 1932, states, “We all know that today, even in Pandaripur, daily worship is being done in the temple accompanied by *natyam* (dance) similarly in Srirangam, during the ten days preceding the *MukkotaiEkadasi* day, worship is generally accompanied by *natyam*.” (P G Sundaresa, JMMA 1932: 122).

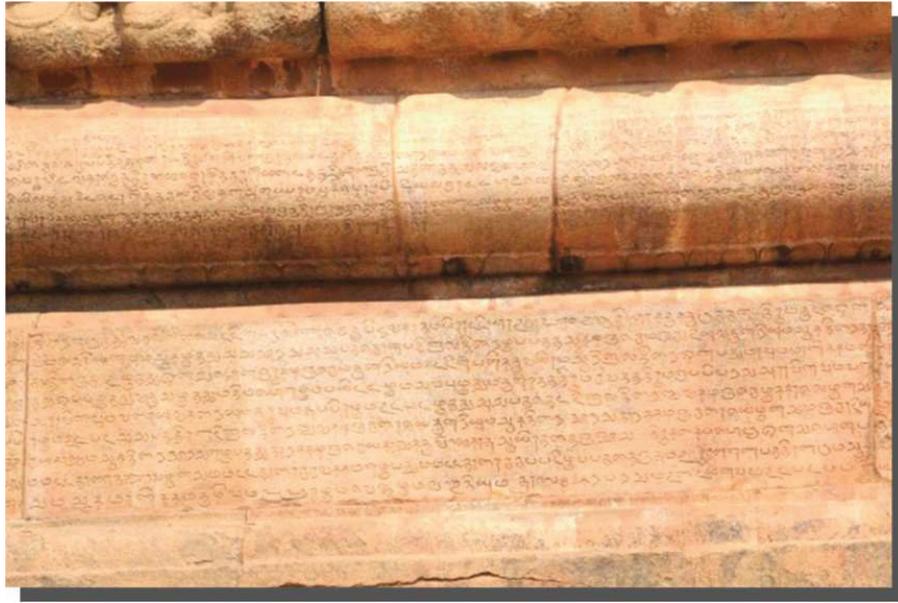
The temple-dancing was officially and legally banned in 1932. It was the result of reports of temple-dancing degenerating into morally questionable activities by the ‘dancers’ especially with the Victorian mind-set of the British rulers of India. It was thus brought to an end a tradition going back many centuries. A tradition that was chiefly responsible for making sure that classical dance survived, in spite of certain negative issues. Even with very hostile circumstances, the dance flowered and evolved and is available to us today. Classical dance was soon revived by culturally minded social reformers. It did become socially acceptable and popular. Dancing in temples precincts has reappeared in recent years with professional classical dancers participating in dance festivals. Also other prestigious events are held by temple trusts and Government tourism and culture departments.

## INSCRIPTIONS ON TEMPLE WALLS AS RECORDS



**Fig. 25: Brihadeshvara Temple, Tanjore Dist. Tamilnadu**

The undisputed cultural records of prevalent practices is provided by the very important temple inscriptions even if they are political, religious or philanthropic. The 12<sup>th</sup> century inscription at the Brhadesvara Temple in Tanjore is one of the most important. It records the event when Rajendra Chola the ruler, ordered four hundred dancers to be brought from nearby temples to be attached to the Tanjore Temple. The list of all dancers, attached to both *Shaivite* and *Vaishnavite* temples is written in the inscription with names on the temple walls. (South Indian Inscriptions 1985:II.II: 259-60). An inscription dating to the reign of Kulottunga III (1205-18) establishes that there was a time-table for the presentation of dance and the dancers took turns: “the assignment of a fixed period in the day for every dancing girl to perform her services by turn in the temple.” (State Inscriptions of Padukkottai 1929:20, no. 169.) The word *nritta* is found in the inscriptions as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Manne Copper Plates (802 AD) mentions the word *nritta* while referring to a subordinate of Rastrakuta Govinda III called Srivijaya who made a grant to those engaged in the service of dancing and singing the *JainaBasadi* at Manyapura, --*vilasini-viracitanritta-gita-vadya-bali...*<sup>11</sup>



**Fig. 26: Inscription on Brihadeshwara Temple Tanjore**

### **TEMPLE RITUAL MANUALS**

Manuals on Temple Rituals are a rich source of documentation. They state clearly the reasons for dance performances in temples. Several temples maintained them with regularity and accuracy. P V Jagadisha Ayyar's book, 'South Indian Shrines' (published in 1920, revised edition 1922), describes dance as a ritual in temples. One such description in a temple in Ramesvaram records a ritual with accuracy : "At 4.30 or 5 am (the *puja* begins) the dancing girl (*muraikari*) officiating for the day, with *rudraksha* beads in place of jewels, dressed up as a Brahmani and her hair uncombed ... opens up all the doors to the *mahamandapa*. Later the god is taken in procession preceded by musicians and attendant dancing girl ... the dancing girl repeats a *tevaraujalor* verse in honour of Siva." (pg. 193) None of these manuals associate temple dancing with any immoral or loose activity or actual prostitution. While most manuals refer to the dancers in temples as *ganikas*, they were also known as *devaganikas*, and there are instances where *devaganikas* and *devadasis* were the same.

We realize the in-depth information that is available in various forms of literature, be it Treaties, Kavya-Nataka, Stories, Travelogues, Inscriptions and so on in this part of my thesis. From Natyashastra times to almost the pre-Prabandha times we are able to

sketch the continuous existence of a solo dance style. Literature becomes a very dependable part of this dance journey.

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