

## A Note on Dancing Sarasvatī Figures

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Dance is essential primitive expression of human feelings. The whole of Indian art is characterised by a strong spiritual and religious connotation. Dance is considered supreme among all the arts because the state of *ānanda* (supreme bliss) to which all artistic creations aspire, may be achieved through the own body of the performer. This is probably the reason why dance has been celebrated in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (2<sup>nd</sup> century CE) and *Nṛttasūtra* of the *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa* (6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE) as the most appreciated way to worship god.<sup>1</sup> According to Indian tradition, dance is performed on all important occasions and embraces all the themes and attitudes of life. It thus becomes the visual expression of the cultural ethos.

From prehistoric to Indus Valley times we have the archaeological evidences of the prevalence of dance in India in the form of visual examples apparently representing dancing human figures.<sup>2</sup> With crystallization of the concepts and forms, dance came to be associated also with the figures of celestials. Dance, in fact, being the sublimation of the most beautiful body movements, has been considered as suitable metaphor in reference to divine activity. Textual references in this respect are found in the earliest Indian literary sources, the *Vedas*, which make mention of dance especially in association with Indra.<sup>3</sup> The earliest examples of *nṛttamūrtis* of gods and goddesses are datable to the Gupta period (5<sup>th</sup> century CE).

Dance involves significant organization of energy, movement and rhythm, which are essential elements of life as well. As such dance becomes an effective symbol for the cosmogonic process, This could be seen at its zenith in the dance of Śiva who in *Purāṇic* tradition is said to be the Supreme dancer.<sup>4</sup> Dancing figures of Śiva are profusely represented in Indian art, especially from the 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century C.E. onwards (fig.1).

Inspired by the development of the concept of dancing Śiva, subsequently the dance forms of other gods and goddesses were also visualised. From the 8th-



**18.1:** Dancing Śiva, Cave 1, Bādāmī (Karnataka), 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE (Courtesy: AIIS, Gurgaon)



**18.2:** Dancing Sarasvatī, Udayeśvara Temple, Udaipur (Rajasthan), c. 1026 CE, after C. Sivaramamurti, *Naṭarāja in Art, Thought and Literature* (N.A.T.L.), New Delhi, 1974

9th century CE onwards, *nṛttamūrtis* of Gaṇeśa, Kārttikeya, Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, Mātṛs-Yoginīs, Cāmuṇḍā, Mahiṣamardinī and Sarasvatī become a regular feature of Indian sculpture and painting. Barring Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa and Sarasvatī, all other deities mentioned above have kinship with Śiva who is celebrated as the Supreme dancer (Naṭeśa).

The Present paper aims at discussing only the dancing figures of Sarasvatī (also known as Vāṇī, Vāgdevī, Bhāratī etc.) in terms of Indian tradition and art. The time frame of study extends till the 13th century CE. In *Vaidik-Purāṇic* tradition Sarasvatī is celebrated as the goddess of wisdom and learning.<sup>5</sup> As obvious extension of this concept, she has been recognised also as presiding goddess of disciplines of knowledge like music and dance. In the *Matsya purāṇa* (7th century CE) Sarasvatī is said to possess all knowledge of Vedas, Śāstras (Scriptures), dance and music.<sup>6</sup> The association of Sarasvatī with music is expressed in terms of iconography through the attribution of Vīṇā as distinguishing feature of her images as per prescriptions of *Matsya Purāṇa*, *Agni Purāṇa* (5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE), *Aparājitapṛcchā* (1150-1250 CE), *Śilparatna and Rūpamaṇḍana*.<sup>7</sup> So far neither the mention of figures of dancing Sarasvatī nor iconographic details of her *nṛttamūrti* in literary sources are known to us. *Śrīkanṭhacarita* of Maṅkha (11<sup>th</sup> century CE) however provides reference to her actual performance of dance describing the fleets of swans which approach Sarasvatī (attracted by the sound of her anklets), as she dances skilfully.<sup>8</sup> The dancing figures of Sarasvatī are particularly profuse among the sculptures from Karnataka (Halebid, Belūr, Hosāhoḷalu, Haranahallī and Somanāthapur). Rare examples of dancing Sarasvatī are also found from Rajasthan (Udayeśvara Temple, Udaipur (fig. 2) and Udaipur Museum) and Andhra Pradesh (Rāmappa temple, Pālampet). The *nṛttamūrtis* may be dated mainly to the period from 11th to 13th century CE.

The earliest extant example so far known to us appears to be the figure carved on the facade of the Udayeśvara temple at Udaipur (c.1026 CE). Though mutilated, it has distinctly been identified as Sarasvatī because of the presence of her swan mount at the lower left corner of the panel. The movement of the major limbs of four-armed Sarasvatī is discernible. The graceful attitude of the arms evokes the technique of dance which has developed subsequently into Kathaka style. The posture of the main left arm, which is *sama* disposition of hands as in Kathaka, is particularly significant in this context. It seems that the figure

represents the initial phase of a *paltā* (movement sequence) of the hands in which the main right arm has just been moved out from *sama* position. The left leg is bent at knee and lifted almost to the level of the waist. The figure is part of a large sculptural composition which includes also the dancing figure of a goddess on the opposite side and a figure of dancing Śiva in the *kūḍu* niche above suggesting the relation of Sarasvatī with Devī and Śiva in terms of dance performance.

The other *nṛttamūrti* from Rajasthan is a loose piece, now exhibited in the Government Museum, Udaipur, datable to the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE. The four-armed figure is identifiable with Sarasvatī mainly on account of the *pustaka* (book) and *knmaṇḍalu* (water vessel) held respectively in the upper and lower left hands. The act of dance can easily be recognised in the *svastika pāda* of the feet and also the gesture of the main right hand displaying *varada-mudrā hasta* with fingers being pointed downwards. The juxtaposition of different perspectives in the depiction of the body limbs (three-quarter profile view of lower bust and legs, and the frontal view of chest and head) creates a sense of gyratory movement. This however does not appear forceful as in some medieval *nṛttamūrtis* of Śiva. The two flanking female figures in symmetrical attitude also evince specific dance movement. They seem to have been represented in the performance of *abhinaya*, while showing the act of applying *sindūra* on the upper part of the forehead. The delicacy of their gestures, being expressive of *śṛṅgāra rasa* (sentiment of love and beauty), combines well with the graceful *lāsya* style performed by Sarasvatī.

*Nṛttamūrtis* of Sarasvatī are found in most prolific number in Karnataka and are datable mainly to the Hoysala period. The popularity of Sarasvatī motif in Hoysala art is testified also by relevant references in coeval literary and epigraphic sources. Features of the body of Sarasvatī have been related to different aspects of dance technique in the *Neminātha Purāṇa* (c.1150 CE) of Nemichandra (renowned Jaina poet at the court of Hoysala king Ballāla II), wherein the glances expressive of various sentiments have been compared to the eyes of the goddess, the hundred-eight *karaṇas* to her ears, the thirty-two *aṅgahāras* to her pearl pendant, the *maṇḍalas* to her head-dress etc.<sup>9</sup> The titles attributed to Śāntalādevī, wife of the great Hoysala king Viṣṇuwardhana are also worth noting in this context. Epithets like "Nāṭya Sarasvatī" and "Saṅgīta Saṅgata Sarasvatī" are mentioned in different inscriptions of the Hoysala period in praise of Śāntalādevī for her proficiency in performing arts.<sup>10</sup> This suggests the importance of dance in Hoysala

royal family as well as the reason of the great reverence for the *nṛttamūrtis* of Sarasvatī.

One of the most beautiful examples of Sarasvatī *nṛttamūrtis* in Hoysaḷa art is the four-armed figure carved on the external wall of the Hoysaḷeśvara temple at Halebid (c. 1117 CE). It represents the goddess as dancing on an elevated pedestal (fig.3). The swan mount of Sarasvatī appears below her right foot which is raised in dance. The exquisitely carved beautiful figure shows perfect balance between the performance of dance gestures and the exhibition of attributes. The two main hands hold, as per textual prescription, *akṣamālā* and manuscript, whereas the additional hands display *alapadma* and *latā hastas*. The combination of these dance gestures with the posture of the feet constitutes a dance attitude which was represented profusely in Hoysaḷa *nṛttamūrtis*. The way of enactment is composed precise and graceful, which reveals the mastery of the *śāstric* form of dance by Sarasvatī. The two flanking figures of musicians playing respectively on drum and cymbals (both *tālavādyas*- percussion instruments), suggest that Sarasvatī has been shown in performance of *nṛtta*.

In another sculpture from the selfsame temple Sarasvatī is shown performing identical dance movements, but in reverse mode (fig.4). The main differences are the number of hands (ten instead of four) which goes to the detriment of the naturalness of the dance movement and the omission of the pedestal. Though the hands are mostly intended to hold attributes *akṣamālā*, *śruk* and *aṅkuśa* in right hands and *śūla*, *Pāśa*, fruit and manuscript in the left hands, the main hands evincing specific dance gestures clearly indicate the prominence given to the dance aspect.

The Hoysaḷa sculpture found in the Keśava temple at Somanāthapur (13<sup>th</sup> century CE) shows a particular form of dancing Sarasvatī. It is a representative example of a group of Sarasvatī *nṛttamūrtis* having *Vīṇā* (sounded by her two main hands) as distinctive feature. The *Vīṇā* is common attribute of Sarasvatī, but in the visual exmples she is usually shown playing the instrument in sitting posture. The core concept expressed by the figure under discussion is the dance of Sarasvatī to the accompaniment of the music of her own *Vīṇā*. This juxtaposition of the musical and dancing connotations suggests comparison with the *Vīṇādhara* dancing form of Śiva. *Vīṇādhara* is one form of Dakṣiṇāmūrti Śiva, the Great Master of Knowledge, which is frequently depicted in dance attitude in the



**18.3:** Dancing Sarasvatī, Hoysaleswara Temple, Halebidu (Karnataka), c. 1117 CE



**18.4:** Dancing Sarasvatī, Hoysaleswara Temple, Halebidu (Karnataka), c. 1117 CE

medieval sculptures from the northern and eastern regions of Indian subcontinent. The association with the *jñāna* aspect of the divinity appears thus as common point in the conception of both dancing Vīṇādhara Śiva and dancing Vīṇādhārīṇī Sarasvatī.

The Kākatīya sculpture from the ceiling of Rāmappa temple, Pālampet (13th century CE), now in the Hyderabad Museum is a rare example showing Sarasvatī as dancing on the back of her swan mount (fig.5). The dance of gods and goddesses on their respective *vāhana* has been an established tradition in the medieval art of eastern regions. Its earliest occurrence is found in the Śiva *nṛttamūrtis* of Pāla period (fig.6). Subsequently it has been extended to some coeval images of dancing Gaṇeśa. Thereafter the same iconographic convention has progressively been introduced into the art of the adjacent region of Orissa wherein it appears as characteristic of some *nṛttamūrtis* of Śiva (Brahmeśvara temple and Pāpanāśiṇi Muṭṭ-Bhubaneswar and Paśchimeśvara temples, Amangai-Cuttak), Gaṇeśa Kosaleśvara, Kisenpur and Banpur and Kārttikeya (Banpur). The impact of the tradition of Orissa on the art of Andhra Pradesh is thus important. The dance on a moving support, such as an animal, gives emphasis to the balance of body in the rhythmic movement of dance and betrays the impact of acrobatics, the features which are commonly found in folk dances. The elegant and composed attitude of Sarasvatī indeed reveals greater concern with the beauty of dance movement than with balance. The sustaining leg is in fact kept straight, a feature which is difficult to maintain in the enactment of an aerial movement while dancing in equilibrium on the back of an animal. Besides the dancing attitude, the presence of *vīṇā*, badly mutilated, in the two main hands of the figure (as suggested by the gesture of the left hand and the extant upper fragment of the instrument) also evokes the association of Sarasvatī with classical performing arts. The popular connotation in fact would have been in total contrast with the very nature of Sarasvatī as exponent of *śāstric* music and dance. The main *nṛttamūrtī* of Sarasvatī is surrounded by different flanking figures. The female accompanists are large in dimension, a feature indicating their prominence in the context of the depiction. Their attractive stances which are expressive of *śṛṅgāra rasa* well combine with the graceful *lāsya* dance of Sarasvatī. The remaining flanking figures of minor dimensions show male musicians playing on drums.

The development of the concept and visual renderings of dancing Sarasvatī



**18.5:** Dancing Sarasvatī, Rāmappā Temple, Pālampet (A.P.), Hyderabad Museum, 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, after C. Sivaramamurti, N.A.T.L.



**18.6:** Naṭeśa, Śaṅkarabandha (Bangladesh), Dhaka Museum, Bangladesh, 10<sup>th</sup> century CE, after C. Sivaramamurti, N.A.T.L.

in Indian art and culture reveals that the association of the goddess with dance essentially was derived from her function as presiding deity of wisdom and learning, which also includes music. The earliest extant representation of Sarasvatī is dated to the Kushān period wherein the goddess holds manuscript and rosary, suggestive respectively of *jñāna* (knowledge) and *dhyāna* (meditation)<sup>11</sup>. The association of swan, which also pertains to knowledge (*nīra-kṣīra viveka*), as mount of Sarasvatī emerges in the visual examples from Gupta period. The swan in Indian literature is also referred to in the context of dance images and hence becomes supportive of the goddess dance in the above example from Pālampet. From the late Gupta period onwards Sarasvatī was conceived also as the presiding goddess of music and hence endowed with *vīṇā* in her hands. In Indian tradition the definition of *saṅgīta* (music) entails the concept of dance, together with vocal and instrumental music. Though the dancing implication is implicit into the musical connotation of earlier Sarasvatī figures, the actual visual examples and the relevant literary and epigraphic references discussed above undoubtedly suggest that the dancing figure of Sarasvatī has not been conceived prior to the 11<sup>th</sup> century CE. The emergence of the concept of dancing Sarasvatī should have undoubtedly been favoured by the coeval socio-cultural-artistic background. In the medieval period (10th - 14th century CE) *śṛṅgāra* (personal decoration) and *saṅgīta* (music) have become integral part of life and its various expressions. The art of dance involving dynamism, rhythm, beauty, pleasure and enjoyment synthesises all the multiplicity of ideas associated with *śṛṅgāra* and *saṅgīta*. The refinement of taste and learning towards both have prompted more sophisticated and elaborate concept in the art forms which are evidenced by the *nṛttamūrtis* of Sarasvatī. From 11th century CE mainly in the art examples from South India, belonging to the Hoysāla period, Sarasvatī has been portrayed in dance attitudes. The popularity of *nṛttamūrtis* of Sarasvatī in Hoysāla sculptures is demonstrated by the development of two different dance forms of the goddess which are distinguished mainly by either the omission or the presence of the *vīṇā* in her hands. Interestingly these figures are found both on Śaiva and Vaiṣṇava temples. Her relation with Viṣṇu derives from the fact that in the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, Sarasvatī has been conceived as the consort of Viṣṇu.<sup>12</sup> In this perspective the dancing *Vīṇādhāriṇī* form of Sarasvatī may thus be considered as the female counterpart of the *Vīṇādhara nṛttamūrtis* of Viṣṇu found in the Keśava temple at Somanāthapur

(13<sup>th</sup> century CE). Śiva as Supreme Dancer has been represented in Indian art since the Gupta period (5<sup>th</sup> century CE), a fact which was source of inspiration for the rendering of dance forms of other gods and goddesses (including Sarasvatī) during subsequent centuries. It may also be noted that dancing Sarasvatī figures are found only in Brahmanical context, despite the fact that Sarasvatī, as presiding deity of knowledge (including music), was popular also in Jaina art and tradition.

## **REFERENCES AND NOTES**

1. *Nāṭyaśāstra*, 4, 272 and *Viṣṇudharmottara Purāṇa*, 3, 34, 28-29.
2. Such visual examples include the pre-historic cave paintings at Bhimbhetka, Pachmarhi, Chambal and Mori (MP), the bronze female figurine from Mohenjodaro and the broken bust from Harappa.
3. *R̥gveda* I, 130, vii; II, 22, iv; VIII, 24, ix. Other divinities are also mentioned in relation to dance in the Vedas, namely Uṣās, Maruts and Apsarases.
4. Śiva is addressed with epithets like Naṭarāja, Naṭeśa, Nāṭeśvara and Narteśvara. It is worth noticing that in the earlier tradition it was Indra and not Śiva, who was endowed with the art of dance and hence addressed, more than once, in *R̥gveda* as *nṛtu* (dancer). The Vedic character of Indra as Supreme Dancer was subsequently assimilated into the dancing form of Śiva, whose dancing exploits are repeatedly mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas*. The dance of Siva is the subject of various works among which C. Sivaramamurti, *Naṭarāja in Art, Thought and Literature*, Delhi, 1974; Anne-Marie Gaston, *Śiva in Dance, Myth and Iconography*, Delhi, 1982; V.S. Agrawala, *Śiva Mahādeva: the Great God*, Varanasi, 1984 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition); P. Banerji, *Naṭarāja The Dancing God*, New Delhi, 1985.
5. The seeds of such conception may be found in some passages in *Vedic* literature which suggest the association of Sarasvatī with wisdom and learning (*R̥gveda*, *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya sutra*). In *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas* also this association has been repeatedly emphasised. Gosh Niranjana, *Śrī Sarasvatī in Indian Art and Literature*, Delhi, 1984, n. 1-4, p.19.
6. *Matsya Purāṇa*, 66, 10.
7. *Matsya Purāṇa*, 66, 10-11; *Agni Purāṇa* 20, *Aparājitaṭṭhā* 230; *Śilparatna* 24, 4 and 8; *Rūpamaṇḍana* 5, 61-63.
8. *Śrikanṭhacarita*, 1,35. The name Sarasvatī does not occur in the verses, but mention is made of the goddess bestowing the knowledge of the *Vedas* which appears as epithet of Sarasvatī in *Matsya Purāṇa*.
9. *Neminātha Purāṇa*, ch. III mentioned in Nandagopal Choodamani, *Dance and Music in the Temple architecture*, Delhi, 1990, p. 66.
10. *Epigraphia Carnatica*, V Hassan Taluk.
11. K.D. Bajpai, "Jaina Image of Sarasvatī in the Lucknow Museum", *Jaina Antiquary*, 11,2, January 1946, pp. 1-4.
12. *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 3, 16.