

An Exquisite Architecture – The *Natya Mantapa*, *Lepakshi*

Author : Rajeshwari M, Bengaluru

A marvel of Vijayanagara architecture is the 16th century Veerabhadra temple which is located at the Lepakshi village in the Sri Sathya Sai district of Andhra Pradesh, India. It was built in 1530 AD by Virupanna Nayaka and Viranna , both brothers who were Governors under the Vijayanagar Empire during the reign of King Achutaraya, at Penukonda who were native to Karnataka. They took the aid of the excellent artisanship of Jakkanna and Hampanna. Among the many significances and brilliance of the temple the Natya Mantapa (dancing hall) is an eye catcher.

The Natya mantapa has 70 pillars, each of them distinct and elegant. The picture below shows the entrance of the Natya Mantapa.



The two pillars on either side at the beginning of Natya mantapa depict a series of dancers performing the folk dance - Kolata.



A set of 12 pillars are placed facing towards the centre of the Mantapa to form a circular space at the centre of the Mantapa. Each of these pillars has a huge sculpture in a sequence facing towards dance space.



The dancer here is beautifully ornate. Her hair is tied into a side knot; multiple layers of jewellery adorning her neck and hands can be seen. The costume can be compared to the pant type of costume used in bharatanatyam today where the bottom is a pant with a flared fan attached to it. The layered fills are evident in the sculpture along with different kinds of Mekhala (waist belt). The feet are adorned with a Kada (thick round anklet).

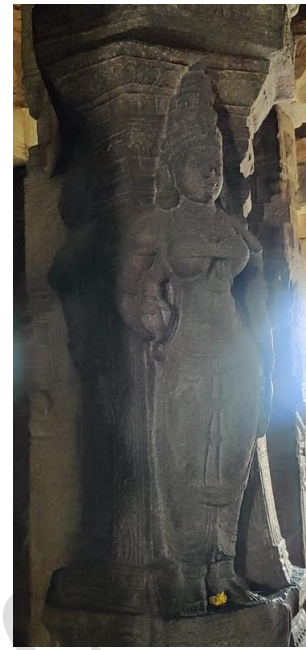
The left foot is raised in Agratala position (on the toe) and the right knee is raised high and feet is in Agratala position. Left hand is placed on the left thigh while the right hand is raised holding the Hamsasya gesture (thumb and index finger in contact). An animal like a dog is seen under the right foot.



(2)

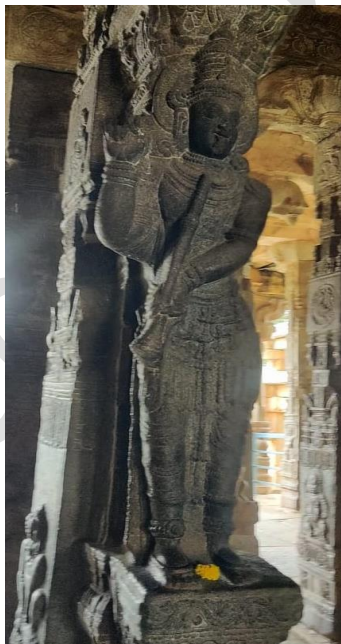


(3)



(4)

The next pillar in the sequence (2) shows the 3 headed Lord Dattatreya playing nattuvanga (metal instrument used to provide rhythm for dance). In the 3rd pillar (3) is that of Lord Shiva with raised right foot and left foot placed on the demon apasmara and has 2 pairs of hands. The front right hand is the Abhaya and the left is dropped near the leg while the right hand of the second pair is seen holding a Damaru and the left hand holding Agni. The next sculpture(4) is that of Parvati who along with Shiva is witnessing the dance.



(5)



(6)

The next series of pillars indicate various instruments being used for the performance. Here in the fifth pillar(5) you see a wind instrument similar to a Shehnai seen today. The next(6) is the Gandharva Tumburu holding Veene (string instrument).



(7a)



(7b)

The seventh pillar shows the playing of a percussion instrument like Dhol (7a). On the other side of the same pillar the sculpture of Bhiringi(7b) with 3 legs can be seen. He is considered to be the guru of Dance and is seen in a posture similar to that of the dancing sculpture of the Mantapa.



(8)



(9)



(10)

The pillars (8) and (9) show Nandi and a 5 headed figure which could be Brahma playing the Mridangam. The next sculpture(10) again is the sculpture of Shiva. Though the front pair of hand and the left leg is damaged the right leg can be seen placed on Apasmara and the other set of hands holding Damaru and Agni.



(11)



(12)

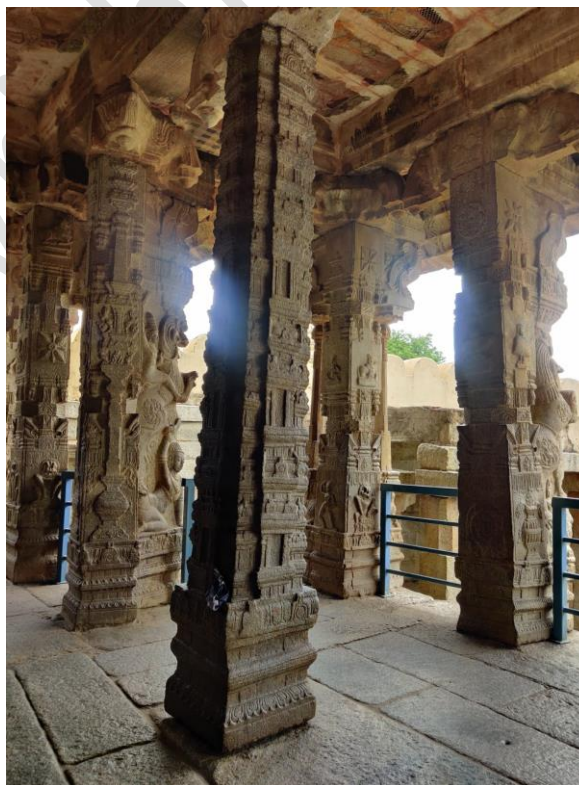
The next set of pillars show the sculptures holding an instrument similar to Ektari(11 and 12). The dance along with the entire ensemble including a few audience is shown beautifully making the Natya mantapa more beautiful and interesting. The ceiling of this circular space has a beautiful lotus carving.



Another interesting part of the Natya Mantapa is the pillar that is said to be hanging. Now one of the 4 corners of the pillars is seen slightly touching the ground but it is said that the pillar was completely levitating until 1902, when the British engineers distorted it in their quest to find out the mechanism behind it. It is said that structural changes and disruption has occurred at the Natya Mantapa due to this. Whatever it is, even today one can pass a sheet of paper or cloth from the remaining Three sides and bring it out. Image below shows the hanging pillar.



In the image below it can be seen that the hanging pillar has tilted when compared to the other pillars and at the top of the pillars next to it the distortion is clear.



Published by Noopura Bhramari – An IKS Centre (July-August 2022) As a part of Nrityashilpayatra programme. www.noopurabhramari.com

Along with these the ceiling of the Mantapa has various stories of Shiva, Mahabharata, Ramayana and others through mural paintings.



The Natya mantapa here at Lepakshi, constructed for the purpose of Natya performance creates a perfect ambience by depicting the Lord of dance, Shiva himself along Parvathi witnessing the performance put forth by Apsaras and Gandharvas - the celestial dancers and musicians in the presence of Guru Bhringi. As a performer myself it feels bliss to even just stand there and experience the aura thinking about dancing to so many instruments being played. One must not miss a visit to this exquisite marvel.

Acknowledgement : My sincere thanks to Dr Manorama for all the guidance and support.



About the Author : Rajeshwari M is a practitioner and student of Bharatanatyam for the past 18 years. She has been trained under Guru Dr Malini Ravishankar and is currently under the guidance of Guru Dr Janaki Rangarajan. She is also training in the aspects of Natyashastra under the guidance of Guru Smt Deeksha Shastry and Guru Smt Namita Rao. She

completed Masters in Bharatanatyam from Jain (Deemed to be University). Apart from practising and teaching the art form she continues to associate herself with research programs. **She is also an Internee in Nrityashilpa Yatra - A temple study programme conducted by Noopurabhramari.**