

SANDHYA TĀNḌAVA – ONE OF THE MANY MARVELS OF LEPĀKṢI'S NĀṬYAMAṆṬAPA

The *Vīrabhadrasvamy* temple of *Lepākṣi* constructed by *Virūpañña* under the reign of *Acyutadevarāya* in the 15th century continually keeps the visitors enthralled not just with the astounding architecture of the *Vijayanagara* period but also with the eloquent depictions of various mythological stories through murals and sculptures, the intriguing back stories, numerous beautiful intricate designs which are today known as *Lepākṣi* saree designs, the sense of equivalence brought between *Hari-Hara*, the architectural brilliance of the hanging pillar, *nāgaliṅga*, etc.

The temple can be divided into three parts, namely, the *nāṭyamaṇṭapa* (Fig 1 & 2), *ardhamaṇṭapa* and the *garbhagrha*. "You attract what you are", as this saying goes, being a dancer, one thing that left me in awe, excitement and calmness at the same time was the *nāṭyamaṇṭapa* that is constructed in-between the first *prakāra* and the *garbhagrha*. It is also referred to as *mukhyamaṇṭapa* or *raṅgamantapa*. These spaces were constructed for *devadāsīs* to offer *nṛtya seva* to the residing deity of the temple and are thus usually in front of the *garbhagrha*. Dancing figures are predominantly spotted in *nāṭyamaṇṭapas*, and this is evidently seen in the *nāṭyamaṇṭapa* of *Lepākṣi* as well.



Fig 1



Fig 2

The vertical panels on either sides of the doorway has figures such as dancers, *nartana Kṛṣṇa*, *cāmara puruṣa*, *kolāta* dancers' panels, musicians with trumpets, *tabla*, *mṛdaṅga* and cymbals. Seventy ornately carved pillars are spread over six rows, out of which twelve central pillars encircle the main dancing hall. Out of the twelve, eight pillars are square shaped and the four corner pillars of the central dancing space are pentagonal in shape. Its ceiling rises to 20 feet and has a *śatapatra kamala* (Fig 3) (lotus with hundred petals) carved that looks down and towers over this dancing space.



Fig 3



Fig 4

The twelve life size sculptures that internally face the dancing space denote the dance of Lord Śiva accompanied by many celestial beings on different musical instruments. The second pillar to the left as we enter the *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* is pentagonal and has the sculpture of Śiva dancing (Fig 4). With his left leg lifted, he can be seen holding *agni* and *ḍamaru*, *abhaya hasta* and *ḍola* in his upper and lower, right and left hands respectively. A rare view of Śiva dancing on *Apasmāra* can be seen here. *Devapuruśa* playing *ḍholu*, *Tumburu* playing *mṛdaṅga*, *Sarasvati* playing *vīṇa* and *Braṁha* playing cymbals can be seen on the either sides of this pentagonal pillar. To the right of Śiva is a *devapuruśa* with *ḍhol* (Fig 5), next to whom is a sage witnessing the dance (Fig 6). The next pentagonal pillar has the sculpture of dancing *Rambhe* (Fig 7) and the pentagonal pillar opposite to this has the guru of *apsaras*, the three-legged *Bhrṅgiśvara* (Fig 8). The sculpture of *Bhrṅgi* can be clearly noticed only when you see it from the view of *Rambhe*'s sculpture. It can be observed that both their *bhaṅgis* are the same which denotes that the student is following her teacher's guidance. To the right of *Rambhe* is the three-faced *Dattātreyā* who is playing the cymbals (Fig 9). The next pentagonal pillar is that of *Pārvati* who is also witnessing the dance (Fig 10), her *sakhis* with *cāmara* can be seen on the other sides of the same pillar. To the right of *Pārvati* is *Sūrya* on trumpet (Fig 11) and *Tumburu* on *Vīṇa* (Fig 12). Next to the *Bhrṅgi* pillar is *Naṁdi* (Fig 13) and *Pañcamukha Braṁha* (Fig 14) playing the *mṛdaṅga*. The other notable sculptures in the *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* are that of *yakśas*, *gaṇḍharvas*, saints, *apsaras*, *kubjas*, *yaḷis*, foreigners and a variety of animals/birds. It can be noticed that *Braṁha* and *Tumburu* can be seen playing two different musical instruments in different pillars of the same *nāṭyamaṅṭapa*.



Fig 5



Fig 6



Fig 7



Fig 8



Fig 9



Fig 10



Fig 11



Fig 12



Fig 13



Fig 14

This depiction of *Śiva's* dance can be suggestive of ***Sanḍhya tāṇḍava*** which is hailed as the happy dance that takes place in the presence of all devas who do not just admire him but also support him on musical instruments. There exists a strong conviction that *Apasmāra* is absent in *Sanḍhya tāṇḍava* but the supremely famous *Rajata sabha murthy* of *Śiva in Cidam̄baram̄* also has *Apasmāra*. The ***pradośa stotra*** which refers to *Sandhya tāṇḍava* tells that Lord *Śiva* happily dances in front of *Gouri* amidst the accompaniment and admiration of the devas. The lyrics has references to *Brah̄ma* playing cymbals and *Sarasvati* playing the *vīṇā* which matches the sculptures in the central dancing space of *Lepākṣi*, whereas some other devas and instruments mentioned in the lyrics does not fit those sculptures. The lyrics also mentions the same attributes and placement of his limbs as seen in the sculpture. *Sanḍhya tāṇḍava* is called as the dance of creation and scriptures which best fits it's carving in a temple.

कैलासशैलभुवने त्रिजगज्जनित्रीं गौरीं निवेश्य कनकाचितरत्नपीठे । नृत्यं विधातुमभिवारुच्छति शूलपाणौ देवाः प्रदोषसमये न् भजन्ति सर्वे ॥	वाग्देवी धृतवल्लकी शतमुखो वेणुं दधत्पद्मज- स्तालोन्नद्रकरो रमा भगवती गेयप्रयोगान्विता । विष्णुः सान्द्रमृदङ्गवादनपटुर्देवाः समन्तात्स्थिताः सेवन्ते तमनु प्रदोषसमये देवं मृडानीपतिम् ॥	गन्धर्वेयक्षपतगोरगासेद्धसाध्य- विद्याधरामरवराप्सरसां गणांश्च । येऽन्ये त्रिलोकनिलया सहभूतवर्गाः प्राप्ते प्रदोषसमये हरपार्श्वसंस्थाः ॥
--	---	---

(Fig 15) 4th, 5th and 6th stanzas of *pradośa stotra*

The depiction of *Śiva's bhikṣāṭana* (Fig 16) story is on the other sides of *Bhr̄ṅgi's* pentagonal pillar. *Pārvati* dedicatedly serving food to the *bhikṣāṭana mūrti* form of *Śiva* despite her apparel sliding down which thus proves her instincts as *Ānnapūr̄ṇā* can be perceived here. A carving symbolizing *Kāḷiṅganarthana* (Fig 17) can be seen in the sixth row. *Kṛṣṇa* standing on the hood of *Kāḷiṅga* holding its tail in the right hand and placing his left hand on his waist is a visual treat. Apart from the sculptures, an exceptionally miraculous facet is the **hanging pillar/ākāśa stambha** (Fig 18), a pillar which does not completely rest on the ground and to which all the other sixty nine pillars of the *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* are believed to have been connected.



Fig 16

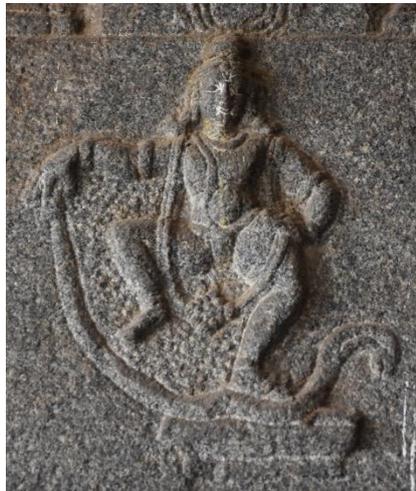


Fig 17



Fig 18

This *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* knows no bounds in fascinating visitors as it is not just restricted to its magnificent pillars and intricate carvings but it also captivates them through alluring ceiling paintings. These **murals** are not just breath-taking but are also neck-wrenching as one can spend hours admiring these effortless looking illustrations of different mythological scenes. The longest panel is the one at the north that depicts the

Manuṅī colan incident. The panels corresponding to the six rows of pillars depict the stories of *Draupadi svayamvara*, *vaṭapatraśayi Kṛṣṇa & Virabhadra*, *Girija kalyaṇa*, *Śiva & Pārvati* playing dice, *Naṭarāja* and *Rāma paṭṭābhīseka* from left to right respectively. The uniquely designed costumes, grandeur in the adorned ornaments, the detailed embellishments in the borders and the connection between different scenes of the story chosen for the narrative are all lucidly brought out by using natural colours. A couple of bowl like dents can also be observed on the floor of the *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* which are said to have been used like palettes to mix these natural colors for painting.

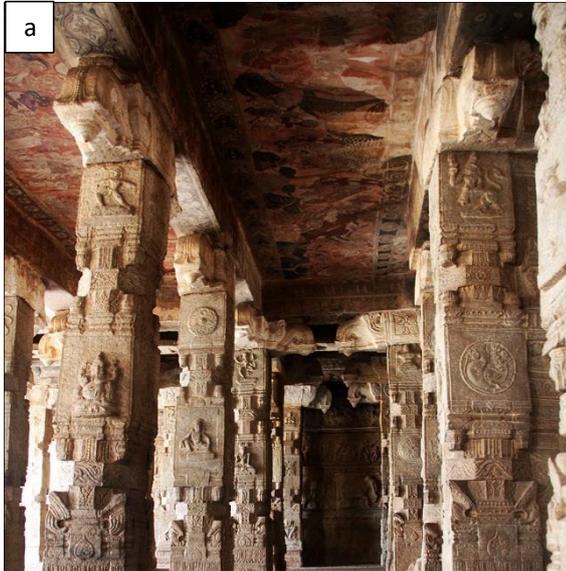


Fig 19 a,b & c – Mural panels

Nāṭyamaṅṭapas were not just aesthetically constructed dance spaces but were also sacred spaces where the *devadāsīs* would offer their devotion through dance and surrender to the supreme lord. These spectacular pieces of art in the *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* are a treasure trove passed onto us by generations of spectacular craftsmen and administrators, but it is disheartening to see the current state of broken sculptures and fading murals. The *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* stands strong irrespective of the regress that it has borne through the years and continues to shelter and showcase the vision, perceptions, motive, creativity, talent and hard work of the creators as well as the happenings, events, social life and nature of the period it belongs to. Be it a devotee, artist, explorer, researcher or a layman, the *nāṭyamaṅṭapa* of *Virabhadrasvamy* temple of *Lepākṣī* does not fail in evoking fascination in their minds, given ode to its numerous remarkable elements which makes it a must visit experience for all.



Kum. Sahana has been training under Dr. Dwaritha Viswanatha since 2013 at Nirmiti. A recipient of student scholarship awarded by Karnataka Government, she has also completed Bachelor in Fine Arts in Bharatanatyam from Tamil University, Junior & Senior Exams from KSEEB and Visharad exams conducted by Akhila Bharatiya Gandharva Mahavidyalaya Mandal, consistently securing first class with

distinction. She has been fortunate to perform in various group and solo programs as a part of Nirmiti. Under her Guru's guidance, she has been teaching Bharatanatyam to the younger batches of Nirmiti since June 2019. She has also presented a dance research paper for Aran International e-journal. She is currently working as a Data Scientist and is passionately indulging herself in different facets of dance. **She is also an Intern in the Nrityashilpa Yatra – a temple study program conducted by Noopura Bhramari.**