

Dancers and Musicians at Belur

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The celebrated shrine of Chennakesava at Belur is the finest example of the irrepressible exuberance of Hoysala sculptors. Elsewhere too, at Halebid and Somanathpur, their art is profusely ornamental, but not rococo. The figure depicted does not merge passively into its elaborately contrived background, but dominates it: stylized and decoratively conceived itself, it lacks the morphological rectitude and realism of figures in earlier stone, as of Pallava or Chola art, but still has a presence, a patent identity.

At Belur, as at other Hoysala shrines, the elevated plinth and outer temple walls are crowded with diverse depictions in bands and friezes — elephants or *yalis* in tandem, intricate floral motifs, gods and demigods and other mythological entities and varied humanity. On these walls there are dancers, drummers and instrumentalists, but it is not of them that I am writing. The temple roof overhangs the walls and columns rise from outside to meet the eaves: atop each column is set a panel at an outward slant, with a figure in it carved so deep as to be mainly in the round and with a trellised ornamental surround, with its feet on the column and the lattice-work above its head touching the roof. It is these bracket figures (as they are termed) that are *the* feature of Belur.

A few bracket figures are masculine, or merely grotesque like the one that displays a woman with a donkey's head, but the overwhelming majority are feminine. Many are dancers and musicians, but there are others too — a huntress with a bow, a woman admiring herself in a hand-held mirror, another attending to an elaborate coiffure, still another standing idly with a parakeet perched on one hand, and the like. Each of these has a specific name at Belur but, surprisingly, not in the literature available on Belur. The picture postcards of the Archaeological Survey of India refer to them as 'a female bracket figure' or a 'female dancer'. In his monumental treatise, *The Art of India*, Calambur Sivaramamurti denotes them by these legends — 'Girl talking to a parrot', 'Belle with a mirror', and 'Danseuse with a drum'. Louis-Frederic terms them '*madanikas*', which only means they are female. All these bracket figures are topless, so their femininity is blatantly displayed.

At Belur, each of these has its specific or generic identity and name. The professional guides refer to them unhesitatingly by their names, and even without their guidance, they can be known merely by looking at them, being well-defined portraits for all their redundant flourishes. I spent the first day at Belur learning the identities of these bracket figures, getting their local Sanskrit names from a guide, and studying camera angles and lighting to photograph them the next day. And while I took my pictures with a long lens, taking care to tilt the negative plane to suit

the outward lean of the figures to avoid foreshortening their faces, a Sanskrit scholar whom I befriended told me why they are what they are called. In this account I shall refer to them by their generic and specific Belur names.

At the base of each panel holding a bracket figure, around its feet, there are subsidiary figures which, following established conventions in our iconography, are shown to a much smaller scale, in dwarfed depiction. These are important in providing adventitious support to the identities of the main figures. For instance, in the depiction of a woman dressing her hair in a tasselled smoothly combed cylinder (Fig. 1), the two subsidiary figures merely stand around, without aiding her — depictions of coiffure dressing (there are more than one), termed Keshashringara, feature passive lesser attendant figures. But when the subsidiary figures are shown playing on a drum or a flute, it is clear that the main figure is that of a dancer or musician. Note the care devoted by the dancers and musicians to their hair, the training of the locks into ringlets above their foreheads.

The passion of the Hoysala sculptors for exquisite three-dimensional detail has been the undoing of their creations in places. A flute-player's hands have been carved wholly in the round, well clear of her body, with the fragile instrument held between them, but while her hands still remain the flute itself is gone, broken off. A drummer's hands have got amputated at the elbows and inevitably the drum held between the hands has disappeared. The heavy, long necklaces that cover the torso hang clear of the body and have been broken off short. However, these minor details do not obscure the evident identities of the main figures.

Now for the dancers and musicians. The illustrations are representative photographs of them. Learned musicologists, consulted, could not tell what classical and dance music prevailed in Karnataka very early in the 12th century, when the Chennakesava temple was built by Vishnuvardhana — only from about the time of Purandaradasa (15th to 16th century) can we be reasonably certain of the musical modes established in south India. However, from the poetry and sculpture of earlier times two things are evident. First, sung music was to the rhythm of percussion instruments, and usually the singer also kept time with cymbals: the main musical instruments of those far days were prototypes of the Veena, and the flute, the latter also employed to supplement the voice. Second, dance was always to the vocal rendering of songs and the beat of drums and other time-keeping instruments.

The figure termed Ganamanjari at Belur (Fig. 2) is of a singer with parted lips, keeping time to her song with bell-shaped cymbals: the subsidiary figures around her feet are two drummers to her right and a cymbalist and a flautist to her left. This is an important figure as singers are so seldom featured in our classical stone. *Gana* is song all right, but why *manjari*? Apparently it is an indication of her considerable repertoire, of the bunch or assemblage of songs she has at her disposal. No other depictions of a singer is there at Belur.

The Veena as now perfected is comparatively recent, owing its structure to Raghunatha Nayaka, chieftain of Thanjavur in the 17th century. It is one of the oldest musical instruments of India and formerly obtained in a great many different forms, and was evolved from the still earlier Yash which was fretless — the modern Veena has 24 frets, whereas the older versions had less. The musicologist P. Sam-

bamoorthy writes : "The one Indian instrument with the largest number of varieties is the Vina. Vina in ancient times simply meant a stringed instrument. It comprised the plucked, bowed and struck varieties." He lists over 30 different kinds from ancient texts.

Two obsolete types of the instrument are on view at Belur, both hand-held by a female figure and both obviously used, not as accompaniment to the voice, but to provide pure-toned melody by themselves, to the beat of drums — as in Veena recitals even today. The Nagaveena, so named since its head is shaped like a cobra's, has no bowl but has frets (indistinctly seen in Fig. 3) and is played with a short stick directed by the forefinger placed on it. A drummer and a cymbalist are shown keeping time to the music.

The Rudraveena is more evolved, with 11 well-defined frets and two bowls. In the figure at Belur (Fig. 4), apparently the musician is not shown actually playing on it, for her hands are well clear of the frets and where the strings should be; two drummers, a cymbalist and a subsidiary figure are the accompanists.

There are other figures of instrumentalists at Belur — a male player of the Nagaveena, drummers of both sexes beating the drum with a short stick and also with their hands, and flautists of both sexes.

The depictions of the musicians are specific and clear. Not so the dancers. However, two of these are free from ambiguity. One is called Guru-Shishya (Fig. 5) and portrays an accomplished dancer instructing her disciple in the art. The broken hands of the preceptress leave one in ignorance of any *mudra* she might be demonstrating; the student, whose lesser status is indicated by being carved to a smaller scale, is evidently practising some dance movement. The other dance figure that is unambiguous is that of a drum-dancer in the *tribhangi* pose (Fig. 6), holding herself bent in three planes — note how the drum is fastened to her left hand with a belt-like band. There are a few other less notable dancers in the bracket figures.

The favourite dance figures of the guides at Belur are the two Mohinis. The term 'Mohini' denotes only one mythological entity in Indian sculpture : it means the form of an irresistibly attractive woman assumed by Vishnu to save other gods from a rampant *asura*. Mohini is much featured in post-Vijayanagar art. In literature it may be applied, as a figure of speech, to a beautiful woman, but never in iconographic nomenclature. The mythological story is as follows.

Shiva, recklessly generous in the grant of boons, is moved by the stern, supplicatory penance of Bhasmasura into granting him his wish — which is that whomsoever he touches on the head should be reduced to ashes. Armed with this deadly power, Bhasmasura sets out to try and test it, and fleeing from him his would-be victims seek the aid of Vishnu to save them from the peril. Vishnu assumes the form of the irresistibly voluptuous Mohini, and dances before the *asura*, who falls headlong for her charms, and is led by a stratagem to place his palm on his own crown, and is instantly reduced to a heap of innocuous ashes.

As I have heard the story, and as two pundits I asked have heard it, it is by being induced to perform the *sandhyavandanam* rite (in which with the last divine name

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Fig. 1: Keshashringara



Fig. 2: Ganamanjari



Fig. 3: Nagaveena



Fig. 4: Rudraveena



Fig. 5: Guru-Shishya



Fig. 6: Drum-dancer



Fig. 7: Bhasmamohini



Fig. 8: Natyamohini

chanted one touches one's crown) that Bhasmasura's end is encompassed. I am told there is another version in which Mohini persuades him to dance, following her own dance movements, and touching her head induces him to do likewise and touch his head. I do not know how far this version has traditional sanction, and if it had currency in the 12th century. But if the figure at Belur termed Bhasmamohini (Fig. 7) is construed as a dance-depiction of the Bhasmasura episode, the name is in order, for in a dance rendering of the *asura's* end, it is only by the dancer executing the fatal touch that the climax can be conveyed.

The other figure, Natyamohini (Fig. 8), is less certain. There is nothing in its impetuous movement or in the pose of its hands to indicate that it is a portrayal of Mohini — on the other hand, there is nothing also to show that it is not. It is at this stage that one begins to appreciate, and respect, the noncommittal circumspection of savants and the Archaeological Survey of India in designating this figure as 'a female dancer', with unexceptionable accuracy. □