

THE 108 KARANAS

*A Technical Re-Interpretation of Chapter IV (Tāṇḍava Lakṣanam) of
Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra*

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The *Karaṇa* as a unit of movement is perhaps the most important subject discussed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* in the *nṛtta* technique of the dance. Indeed many contemporary scholars and lay readers of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* have restricted their discussion of the *nṛtta* technique to a discussion of the 108 *Karaṇas*. Since these *Karaṇas* have also been represented sculpturally in the Chidambaram and the Bṛhadeśvara temple in Tanjore, and since inscriptions of Bharata's verses are found in the Chidambaram temple, it has often been taken for granted that the description of *Karaṇas* in the Bharata *Nāṭyaśāstra* is a description of static poses; it has rarely been stated that what Bharata describes as a *Karaṇa* is a unit of movement built up of several smaller movements and that it is really a cadence of movement culminating in a pose. It has not been clearly understood that when a unit of movement is broken up into its several constituent movements, several poses can result at different points in time. This being so, any sculptural representation of a description of movement in language can be a sculptural representation of an arrested moment in an entire sequence of movement.

The effort of most scholars has been to identify the sculptured *Karaṇas* of the Chidambaram temple with the verses of the IVth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and to point out the discrepancies between the inscriptions and the sculptural representation. The history of analysis of the sculptured *Karaṇas* has been a history of the attempt at the correct numbering of the *Karaṇas* in the Chidambaram temple. More recently this has also been done with the sculptural representation in the Bṛhadeśvara temple. No attempt has been made by these scholars to determine

whether the sculptured *Karaṇa* represents the first or intermediary or final positions of the unit of movement described by Bharata as a *Karaṇa*.

Again, whenever *Karaṇas* have been analyzed from the point of view of the *nṛtta* technique scholars have restricted their discussion to the IVth chapter, and whenever translations have been made, or commentaries written, the terms indicating movements of the hands, feet, head, torso, or indicating the use of a particular *cārī* or *sthāna*, these have been translated generally or the terms have been reproduced without stating that the technical terms are discussed by Bharata in chapters subsequent to chapter IV of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The impression gained from such discussions and translations is that the *Karaṇa*, although a very important aspect of the *nṛtta* technique, is not too comprehensible today.

Our aim here is therefore to interpret these units of movement as movement and not as static poses on the one hand, and to reclassify the *Karaṇas* in the light of the most important movement of the particular cadence on the other. Each *Karaṇa* can be broken up into its constituents of movements of the major limbs—*aṅgas*, and the minor limbs—*upāṅgas*. The movements of the *aṅgas* and the *upāṅgas* have been discussed in chapters VII, IX, X and XII of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as part of the general technique of *āṅgika abhinaya* applicable equally to dance and drama. These *Karaṇas* can be thus understood fully only by a reference to these subsequent chapters where movements of individual limbs of the body have been discussed and where units of static positions like the *sthānas* and *āsanas* and preliminary units of movements like the *cārīs* have been discussed.

No accurate analysis of the *Karaṇas* is possible without a reclassification of the *Karaṇas* in terms of the most important movement of the particular *Karaṇa*. Some of these *Karaṇas* take their name from the *nṛtta hasta*, some from the position of the hip and waist (*kaṭi*) some from the feet (*pāda*) positions. Many take their name from the nature of the leg extension, like the *vṛścika Karaṇas*, and others from the *cārī*, the *sthāna* or *āsana* they employ. Some indicate the nature of movement like the *recita* or *bhramarī*. The *Karaṇas* can be reclassified in terms of the most distinctive feature into 9 categories. Once this is done and it is known which movement is the principal movement in a given sequence, then the problem of identification of the sculptured *Karaṇa* also becomes a problem of indicating whether or not the sculptural representation captures this principal movement. The two chief attempts which have been made to identify the sculptured *Karaṇas* of the Chidambaram temple with the correct verse of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* chapter IV have been by B. V. M. Naidu in the *Tāṇḍava Laksanam* and by the editors of the two editions of *Nāṭyaśāstra*

Volume I in the Gaekwad Oriental series. Both these authorities have used the Archeological Departments' wood-blocks for illustration, and both have tried to relate an appropriate verse with the sculptural representation. Often there is unanimity, but sometimes there is complete divergence. These authorities not unlike others have also assumed that the *Karaṇas* are static poses, and all the efforts at identification are attempts at the identification of the pose, the stance, and there is little or no indication of which particular moment in a sequence is being represented.

We have reclassified the *Karaṇas* into different categories, and have attempted to indicate the exact chapter and verse of the several movements of the individual limbs mentioned by Bharata. Further, an attempt has also been made to compare the identifications of the two authorities quoted above of the sculptural representation in the Chidambaram temple. An attempt has also been made to indicate whether or not the sculptural representation illustrates the description of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* accurately or not.

On the basis of what has been stated above, the *Karaṇas* can be reclassified under the following categories :

- (a) *Sama* : those which indicate stable positions i.e., *samanakha* 5, *līna* 6, *sambhrānta* 101,
- (b) *Hasta Karaṇas* : those which derive their name from or have the *nṛtta hastas* as their most significant movement: i.e., *talapuṣpapuṭa* 1, *vartita* 2, *nikuṭṭaka* 9, *ardhnikuṭṭaka* 10, *ghūrṇita* 32, *lalita* 33, *catura* 39, *uromaṇḍalika* 54, *gajakrīḍitaka* 68, *talasamsphoṭita* 69, *sannata* 75, *karihasta* 87.
- (c) *Svastika Karaṇa* : those that take their name from the *svastika*, crossed, position of either the hands, feet, or the thighs : i.e., *svastika recita* 7, *maṇḍala svastika* 8, *vakṣasvastika* 13, *svastika* 15, *prṣṭhasvastika* 16, *diksvastika* 17, *ardhasvastika* 22, *pārśvanikuṭṭaka* 49, *nāgāpasarpita* 106.
- (d) *Recita Karaṇa* : those which take their name from the *recita* of either the hands or feet or waist—*kaṣi*—or neck, etc. i.e., *ardharecita* 12, *unmatta* 14, *ākṣipta recita* 20, *recitanikuṭṭita* 29, *vaiśākha recita* 37.
- (e) *Vṛścika Karaṇas* : those which make an arch of the leg like a scorpion's or utilise a back extension or backflexed position of the leg : i.e., *vrikuncita* 26, *vṛścika kuṭṭita* 42, *latā vṛścika* 44, *vṛścika recita* 46, *vṛścika* 47, *lalāṭatilaka* 50, *mayuralalita* 80, *simhākarṣita* 90.
- (f) *Sthāna Karaṇas* : those which derive their names from the static positions of the *sthānas* : i.e., *vyamsita* 48, *niveśa* 96, *lolita* 105.

(g) *Cārī Karaṇas* : those which are derived from the *cārīs*. Sometimes the name suggests it, and sometimes the verse defines it ; i.e., *apaviddha* 4, *alāta* 18, *bhujaṅgatrāsita* 24, *ūrdhvajānu* 25, *mattalli* 27, *ardhamattalli* 28, *dandapaksa* 34, *bhujaṅgatrāsita recita* 35, *nūpura* 36, *bhramara* 38, *bhujaṅgāncita* 40, *daṇḍarecita* 41, *krāntaka* 51, *cakramaṇḍala* 53, *ākṣipta* 55, *dolāpāda* 60, *vinivṛtta* 62, *pārśvakrānta* 63, *vidyūdbhrānta* 65, *atīkrānta* 66, *pārśvajānu* 73, *sūcī* 76, *ardhasūcī* 77, *sūcīviddhā* 78, *apakrānta* 79, *daṇḍapāda* 82, *hariṇapluta* 83, *preṅkholita* 84, *nitamba* 85, *skhalita* 86, *simhavikrīḍita* 89, *udvṛtta* 91, *upāsṛata* 92, *talasaṁghaṭṭita* 93, *janita* 94, *avahittha* 95, *elakākṛīḍita* 97, *ūrūdṛtta* 98, *madaskhalitaka* 99, *viṣṇukrānta* 100, *vṛṣṣbhakrīḍita* 104, *śakatāśya* 107, *gaṅgāvatarana* 108.

(h) *Kaṭi Karaṇas* : those which derive their names from the movements of the *kaṭi* (waist or hips) : i.e., *kaṭichinna* 11, *kāṭisama* 19, *kaṭi bhrānta* 43, *chinna* 45.

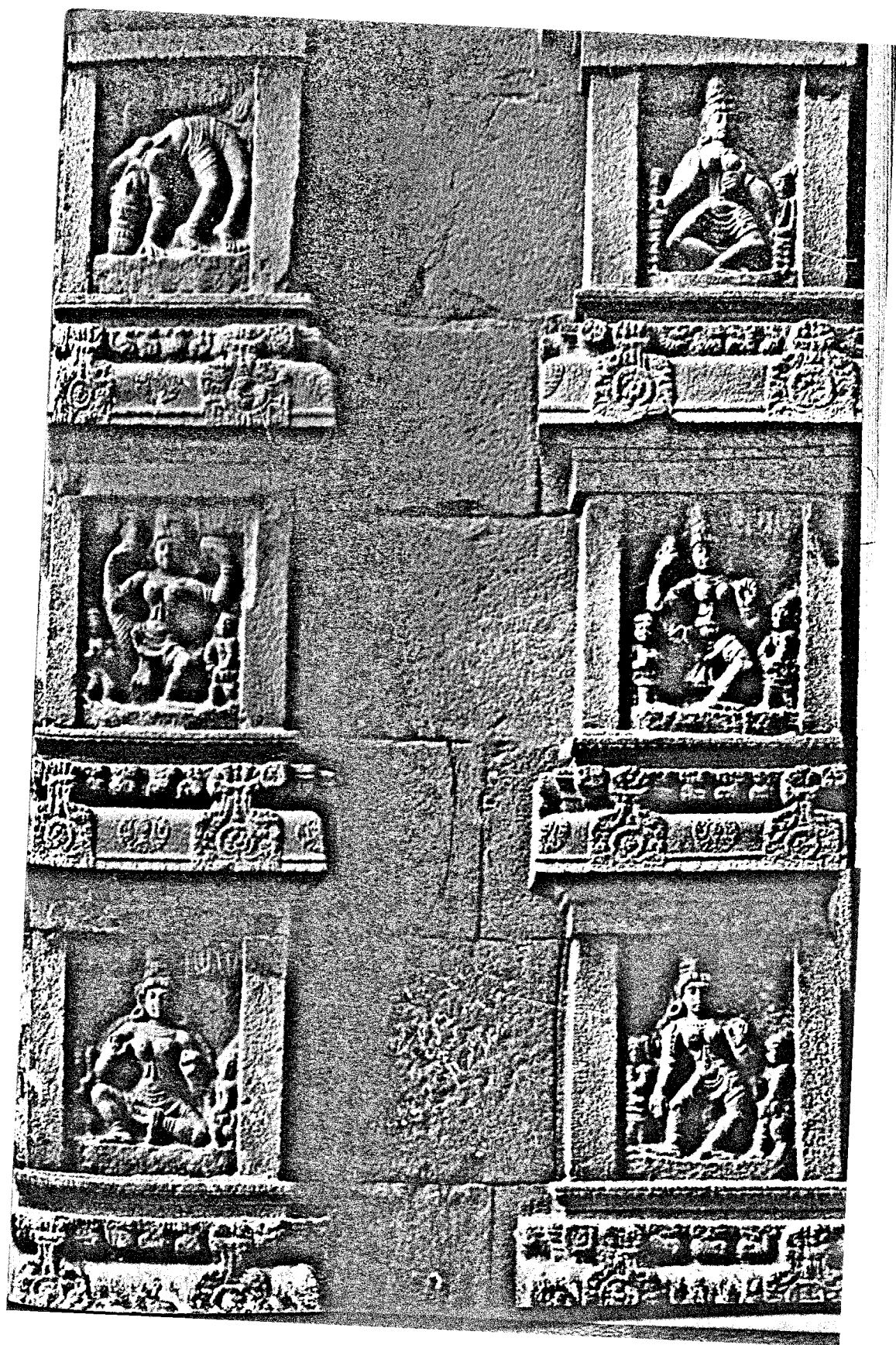
(i) *Pāda Karaṇas* : those which take their name from the position or movements of the feet : i.e., *añcita* 23, *pādāpaviddha* 30, *tālaviḷāsita* 56, *argala* 57, *vikṣipta* 58, *āvarta* 59, *garūḍaplūta* 70, *gaṇḍasūcī* 71, *grdhrāvalinaka* 74, *sarpita* 81, *prasarpita* 88, *viṣkambha* 102, *udghaṭṭita* 103.

(j) *Ūru, pārśva and jānu Karaṇas* : those which derive their names or employ movements of those parts of the body as their most distinctive feature : i.e., *kunceta* 52, *nivṛtta* 61, *vinivṛtta* 62, *niṣumbhita* 64, *vivartita* 67, *parivṛtta* 72.

Since it is not possible here to analyze in detail all the *Karaṇas* and their sculptural representation in the Chidambaram temple, we can only deal with a few significant examples from the categories mentioned above. The most distinguishing feature of the *sama Karaṇas* is the erect unbent position of the knees. In almost all the other *Karaṇas*, the outward spread (*kṣipta*) position of the knees is taken for granted. In the *sama Karaṇas* however the erect knees and the *sama pādu* (flat feet) are emphasized. There is some difference of opinion in the identification of *sambhrānta Karaṇa* 101, by authorities and the figure identified by Mr. Naidu in the *Tāṇḍava Laksanama* seems nearer the description of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

Photographs : P55 : 1. *Karaṇas* from the East Gopuram, Nataraja temple, Chidambaram ; Top 66, 77 ; Middle 83, 80 ; Bottom 78, 63.

P56 ; 2. *Karaṇa* 24 "Bhujaṅgatrāsita" ; 3. *Karaṇa* 23 "Añcita" ; 4. *Karaṇa* 47 "Vṛṣcika" ; 5. *Karaṇa* 39 "Catura".





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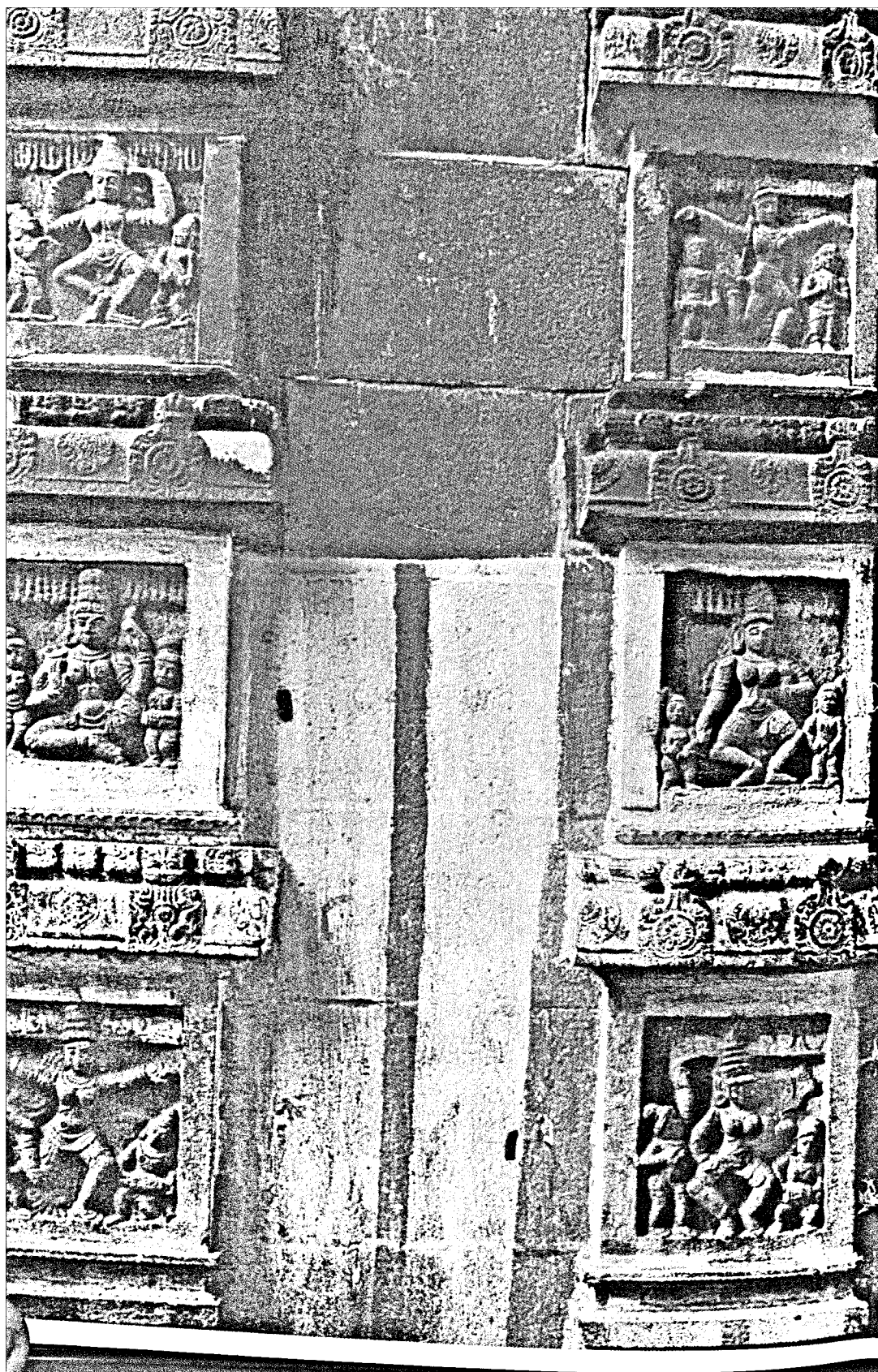
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Amongst the *hasta* *Karāṇas* there are many interesting examples of both agreement and complete divergence between the description of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and the sculptural representation. In the very first *Karāṇa* *talapūṣpapuṣa*, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* mentions the *pūṣpapuṣa hasta* and the *agratala sancara* feet. In the sculptural representation however, while the *pūṣpapuṣahastas* are accurately depicted, there is no indication of the *agratala sancara* foot (or feet), where the toe must be placed on the ground. Since there is no other figure which can be identified as this *Karāṇa*, one can only conclude that the sculpture represents the initial position, and not the final one.

In the *Karāṇa uromaṇḍalikā*, the *uromaṇḍalā* circular movement of the arms and hands is the most important feature : the text mentions a *svastika* position to begin with, and Abhinavagupta in the commentary mentions the *sthītāvartā* and *baddhā cārī* as initial positions of the feet. The writers of the *Tāṇḍava Lakṣaṇam* and Ramāswami Sāstri, editor of the second edition of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (in the Gaekwad Oriental series), however do not identify the same figure in the Chidambaram temple as this *Karāṇa*. However if the *uromaṇḍala* movement of the hands is to be taken as the most distinguishing feature, then the figure identified by Mr. Naidu seems to be nearer the description of the text. It must be added however that this is a movement of the entire arms, and thus only the final position can be said to have been depicted. The *sannata Karāṇa* 75 ; the two most important features of this *Karāṇa* are the *sannata dola hasta*, and the jumping in the *harinapluta cārī*. The *Tāṇḍava Lakṣaṇam* writers take their clue from these movements, and thus identify a figure, which represents a jump, (although a somewhat more violent one than the text would warrant) and has the *dola hasta*. Mr. Sastri seems to take his clue from the initial *svastika* position mentioned by the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, and identified a figure which has the crossed *svastika* feet, but no *dola hastas*. One can conclude from either of these identifications that the writers have tried to identify either the final or the initial position of the movement, as the *karāṇa sannata*. Judging however from the fact that no other figure represented in Chidambaram can be identified as this *Karāṇa*, the figure identified by Mr. Naidu seems to be closer to the description of the final position of the *Karāṇa* in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*.

A *Karāṇa* like the *karihasta* 87, on the other hand was easier to depict, since it indicates a final stance more than a movement, and thus

Photographs : P57 ; 6. *Karāṇa* 50 "Lalāṭatilaka" ; 7. *Karāṇa* 40 "Bhujāṅgāncita" ;

8. *Karāṇa* 48 "Sthānajvyamsita".

P58 : 9. *Karāṇas* from the East Gopuram ; Top 68, 75 ; Middle 96, 65
Bottom 70, 81.

both the authorities have identified the same figure as the *karihasta Karaṇa*. The sculptural representation is fairly correct, because the sculptor has illustrated both the *karihasta* and the *añcita* foot mentioned in the text.

Amongst the *svastika Karaṇas*, except for one or two, the important movements relate to the crossed position of the feet and the hands. They are distinguished from each other by the manner of the movement, and the exact area where the *svastika* takes place. Thus the *maṇḍala svastika* indicates a circular movement preceding the *svastika* of the arms, and the *vakṣasvastika* indicates a crossing at the chest level: the *prsthasvastika* indicates the posterior view and the *diksvastika* the profile. A sculptural representation of all these distinctions must have been somewhat difficult for the sculptor, and this results in a similarity of figures which represent the *vakṣasvastika*, *svastika* and *ardhasvastika* on the one hand, and movements like the *prsthasvastika* and *diksvastika* on the other. In some cases, such as the *ardhasvastika*, the sculptor has not depicted important hand positions like the *karihasta*, and this has led to an inaccurate sculptural representation. The authorities have identified these figures also on the basis of the crossed position and have not pointed out the differences between the sculptural illustration and the textual description.

The same limitation is observed in the sculptural depiction of the *recita Karaṇas*, which are complete movements. Many liberties have been taken in the depiction of these *Karaṇas*, and but for the uniform *kṣipta* (outspread position) of the knees, with the one *dola hasta* (or both arms in *dola*) they could be identified as some other *Karaṇas* of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. Wherever the text has described the *udghaṭṭita* movement (the toe-heel) of the feet, the sculptor has depicted the *kuncita* or *agvatasancara* foot. These figures can be identified only as the initial positions of the *recita Karaṇas*.

The correct depiction of the *vrścika Karaṇas* was easier since most of them indicate a very definite arched position of the leg in its front, back, or side extension. Indeed, the *Karaṇas* of this group lend themselves beautifully to sculptural representations. The *vrścika kuttīla* and the *latā vrścika* indicate a back-flexed position; so do the *vrścika recita* and the *vrścika*. The position of the hands and arms differ in each of these, and the differences in movement arise more out of the difference of the other limbs than the leg extensions. The *lalāṭatilaka* and the *mayūralalita* belong to a different type of leg extension. In fact the *lalāṭatilaka* indicates a complete leg extension where the leg is uplifted without the knee bent, so that the toe touches the forehead. The two authorities

agree on the identification of most of these figures, and except for the *simhākaraṣita*, there is little room for doubt that the sculptural representations are accurate illustrations of final positions indicated in the text.

Surprisingly, none of the *Karaṇas* of the *sthāna* group have been accurately depicted by the sculptors in the Chidambaram temple. A *Karaṇa* like the *vyamsita* where the *ālīḍha sthāna* has been clearly mentioned in the text is rather clumsily sculptured. The feet are not five *tālas* apart, and the leg is not extended fully sideways. The *ālīḍha* had been represented sculpturally as early as the Rāṇi Gumphā caves, and it is indeed surprising that the sculptors of the East Gopuram should have faltered in the depiction of such a well known pose. The same is true of the other *sthāna Karaṇas* like the *niveśa* where the *maṇḍala sthāna* is described in the text as also the *lolitam Karaṇa* where the *vaiṣṇava sthāna* is mentioned.

An analysis of the *Karaṇas* derived from the *cārīs* and a comparison of their identifications by scholars deserves an independent study. Most of these *Karaṇas* are descriptions of complete units of movements and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* has described them in fuller detail than the other *Karaṇas*. Many of the *Karaṇas* take their names from the *cārīs* with identical names, and the particular *cārī* is the most distinctive feature of the cadence. Often there are more than one or two *cārīs* used in a single *Karaṇa* and for an accurate illustration it would have been necessary to depict each *Karaṇa* through a series of sculptural representations, rather than through just one figure. Bharata has taken pains to indicate in the case of these *Karaṇas* almost without exception the initial, the intermediary and final position of the movement. In the *alāta Karaṇa* for example, the initial position is of the *alāta cārī*, and the final position is of the *ūrdhvajānu cārī*. The intermediary movement is a pirouette. In the initial position the hands are on the level of the shoulders : in the final position they extend down. The sculptural representation does not depict the initial position, but the final one, with the *ūrdhvajānu cārī*, and the hands extended down. Both Naidu and Sastri identify the same figure as the *alāta Karaṇa* but do not point out that the sculpture represents the final and not the initial position. The finest sculptural representation of the *ūrdhvajānu cārī* is however seen in the *Karaṇa* of that name, and this seems to have been a great favourite with sculptors in India, judging from its frequent depiction in South Indian temples, Khajurāho, and Bhuvaneśvara. The *daṇḍapakṣa* with both arms extended diagonally (one up and the other down) like a staff, the *daṇḍa recita* and the *daṇḍapāda* all utilise the *ūrdhvajānu cārī*. The sculptures invariably depict this final *ūrdhvajānu* position of the legs, and the differences occur only in the movements of torso, and the hands. The

bhūjaṅgatrāsita, the *bhūjaṅgatrāsita recita*, and *bhūjaṅgāncita* form another sub-group where instead of the *kṣpita* position of the knees, the crossed thigh position of the *bhūjaṅgatrāsita cārī* is emphasized. What is commonly known as the *naṭarāja* pose belongs to this variety of the *Karaṇas*. The most controversial sculptural representation of the *Karaṇas* also belongs to the *cārī* group of *Karaṇas*; the contemporary classical Indian dance styles give little indication of acrobatic cadences of movements, and the *Nāṭyaśāstra* is not too clear in its descriptions of some of these; judging from the sculptures however, it is not difficult to conclude that some of these *Karaṇas* must have formed a part of the *nṛtta* technique of the classical dance. Indeed, a few rare survivals can be seen in dance styles like the Oḍḍisi. Of these *cakramandala*, *śaktāsya* and the *gaṅgāvatarāṇa* are the more important. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* only lays down that the *cākramaṇḍala* is derived from the *aḍḍitā cārī*, and that the hands are in *uromaṇḍal*. However the direction of the *uromaṇḍala hasta* and the name of the *Karaṇa* gives us a clue to the nature of the *Karaṇa*, and it is possible physically to attain this position from the *aḍḍitā cārī*. The *śaktāsya* is also not described as an acrobatic *Karaṇa* by Bharata. Although the extended *talasañcara* feet are spoken about, it is not mentioned that they touch the head after a backturn. This however is implied in the commentary of Abhinavagupta when he says that the *Karaṇa* is to be used for *bālakriḍā* etc. The sculpture again represents the final rather than the initial position described by Bharata. The sculptors must have followed an oral tradition in depicting this *Karaṇa*, for only prevalence could have justified this particular sculptural depiction.

The same is true of the last *Karaṇa*, namely the *gaṅgāvatarāṇa*. Here however, the description of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* suggests such a pose when it speaks of both feet being lifted up and *tripatākā* hands as facing the ground. Physically this could be performed only if the hands were in contact with the ground, and this is accurately represented in the sculpture.

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan combines practice and scholarship in the field of dance. A pioneer in the establishment of schools of music and dance and an organiser of dance festivals in the Capital, she has led several cultural groups to international conferences and festivals. A disciple of India's foremost masters in Kathak, Bharatanatayam and Manipuri and trained in the analysis and notation of dance movements under Dr. Laban, she has travelled, lectured and demonstrated extensively all over the world. Author of the book 'Folk Dances in India', she is a regular contributor to Indian and foreign journals devoted to the arts.