

Dance Sculptures of the Medieval Temples of North Gujarat

(With Special Reference to the *Natyashastra* Tradition and
Sangitopanishatsaroddhara)

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The dance sculptures described here belong to the medieval period in the history of Gujarat, dating from the middle of the eighth century to the end of the thirteenth century. In the country, as a whole, it began with the decline of the Gupta dynasty and the dismemberment of Harsha's empire in the seventh century and ended with the Muslim conquests.¹ This period extended roughly from the ninth to the fourteenth century.

The medieval age was characterised by the splendour of its buildings and monuments resulting in a legacy of immense architectural and sculptural wealth. A multitude of gods and goddesses and exquisite figures containing some of the masterpieces of Indian sculpture adorn the walls of the temples. From times immemorial, the temple has been the focal point of religious, cultural and social life. The spirit of *Bhakti* and a desire to earn spiritual merit prompted devotees, merchants and kings to lavish money on constructing these edifices. Since the temple was the abode of the god, where he lived almost in a human fashion², it was the duty of the priest to provide the image with all manner of comforts. The deity had to be entertained with music and dance. Thus, dance formed an integral part of *seva*. Innumerable inscriptional and other evidences reveal that special *natamandapa*-s formed part of the temple where dancing as a ritual was performed by *devadasi*-s.

The medieval temples of North Gujarat, in particular Modhera, Delwada, Taranga and Kumbharia, besides the Rudramahalaya and the sculptural remnants of the Rani ni vav and other edifices of Patan and the neighbouring area, point to the strong *Natyashastra* tradition which prevailed during the medieval period. The history of the dance movement, as reflected in the dance sculptures of these monuments, and a study of the *Sangita* texts of Gujarat, suggest that the dance tradition continued not merely in line with the *Natyashastra parampara*, but also incorporated the gradual development and variations observed by *shilpin*-s and creative writers.

From the thirteenth century onwards, manuals on dance and music are to be found from practically every region of the country. In this context, Vachanacharya Sudhakalasha's text *Sangitopanishatsaroddhara (SUS)*³ deserves special mention. As its very name suggests, it is an abridged version of a bigger and probably more comprehensive work called *Sangitopanishat* written by the same author in 1350 A.D. This work also deals with the art of dancing and appeared on the scene a century after the monumental work *Sangitaratnakara (SR)*⁴ by Sharangadeva. It is, therefore, obvious that we obtain, in the *SUS*, a tradition from Western India, almost contemporary with that of the *SR*, which has preserved the *Sangita* and the *Nritta* traditions of the Deccan and Karnataka during the thirteenth century.

Similarly, from Rajasthan, there is the *Nrityaratnakosha (NRK)*⁵, another important text by Kumbharana (1443-1468 A.D.) which also records the dance traditions prevalent during the fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries as a continuum of the *Natyashastra* tradition in Western India. It sheds sufficient light on the *nartana parampara*, wherein several points of similarity are discerned. The *NRK* manuscripts are found in the four *Ullasa*-s which follow the *Natyashastra* and the *Sangitaratnakara parampara*.

*Mansollasa (MU)*⁶, the famous encyclopaedic work by Someshwara, the Western Chalukya King of Kalyani, also deals with dance and music. Known also as *Abhilashitarthachintamani*, *Manasollasa*, besides dealing with a large variety of subjects like the science of polity, the lore relating to taming horses and elephants, the science of jewellery, architecture, iconography and paintings, also mentions the luxurious pursuits and pastimes of the aristocracy in ancient India, which included the art of dance and music. The eighteenth *vinoda* summarises the art of dancing which followed the *parampara* of the *Natyashastra* and though it reveals some confusion in terminology, it essentially points to the uniformity seen in the history of dance movement during the medieval period.

The *shilpa* texts like *Samarangana-Sutradhara (SS)*⁷, *Aparajitaprchchha (AP)*⁸ and *Kshirarnava (KSV)*⁹ and the *Natyashastra* texts (referred to above), when studied with a view to the inter-relationships between the plastic and the performing arts, shed valuable light on the art of dancing prevalent during the medieval period. *SS*, ascribed to the Paramara king, Bhojadeva of Malwa (1018-1060 A.D.), and *AP*, written two centuries later, lay down the canons and principles employed in the building of temples during this period. *Vastushilpa* is also referred to in the *Matsya*, the *Agni* and the *Vishnudharmottara (VDP)*¹⁰ *Purana*-s as well as in Varahamihira's *Brihatsamhita*. *AP* specifically mentions the *Nagara* style of architecture, followed in Madhyadesha, which is found in the temples under review.

Any historical reconstruction of the dance style prevalent in the medieval period necessarily calls for correlation between the texts and manuals and the material available in the historical chronicles and the regional literature. All these sources point to the strong continuum of the *Natyashastra* tradition seen in the dance sculptures of Gujarat. Scholars like Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan¹¹ and others have succinctly demonstrated the inter-relationship between the arts of dance and sculpture and traced the history of dance movement in India as a whole. The methodology employed in analysing the dance sculptures of North Gujarat follows a similar approach, highlighting the prevalent dance style as seen in several temple sculptures.

This unity and close inter-relationship between the arts of dancing, sculpture and architecture is also reflected in the literature of the period. The Chalukya rule was a golden era in the cultural life of Gujarat. The religious needs of the people created a demand for sculptures and paintings; and consequently, guilds of sculptors, architects and painters came to be established in various parts of the country. The court poets and writers vied with one another to give expression

to their creative urges. And the fall-out has been a staggering body of literature that abounds in arresting imagery relating to dance.

The great Hemachandracharya, a contemporary of Siddharaja, wrote his classic *Dvyashraya Kavya*, and other scholarly works including *Kavyanushasana*, *Dhatuparayana*; *Chhandonushasana*, *Pramanamimamsa*, *Yogashastra*, *Trishashtishalakapurushacharita* which rightly earned him the title 'ocean of knowledge'. He attracted around him several gifted literary figures who accepted him as their preceptor and emulated him. Among his disciples were Ramachandra and Gunachandra, the authors of the *Natyadarpana*; Mahendrasuri, Vardhamanagani, Devachandra, Udayachandra, Yashashchandra, Balachandra. Foremost among them was indeed Ramachandra who was considered so great a *vidvan* that he ranked next in order to Hemachandracharya himself. Ramachandra wrote many Sanskrit plays—*Raghuvilasa*, *Nalavilasa*, *Yaduvilasa*, *Satyaharishchandra*, *Nirbhayabhimavyayoga*, *Mallikamakarandaprakarana*, *Vanamalanatika*, *Kaumudimitrananda* and *Yadavobhyudaya*. Among his poems, *Kumaraviharashataka* and *Ugadidevatrimshika* are quite well-known.¹² The group came to be known as Hemachandracharya and his literary circle.¹³ Besides the Sanskrit compositions, Jain scholars wrote several stories in Prakrit and a large corpus of literature in Apabhramsha. During the time-span of nearly three hundred and fifty years, a rich literary movement flourished, reflecting the social and cultural life of the people.

The first ever available Sanskrit drama written in Gujarat appears to be *Karnasundari* of the poet Bilhana who was originally from Kashmir, but had, like many of his contemporaries, sought royal patronage in other parts of India. He lived in Gujarat during the reign of Karnadeva Solanki, Bilhana's drama is modelled on Kalidasa's *Malavikagnimitra* and Harsha's *Ratnavali*. The *nayika* of the play, *Karnasundari*, is the daughter of Mayanalla, the king of Karnataka, and the future mother of Siddharaja. Legend has it that she was proficient in classical dance and it is possible that she might have brought in her marriage party a troupe of dancers. It is recorded that the play was staged at Patan during the *Yatra* festival of Adinath in Shantyutsavagraha.

The tradition of the Sanskrit drama and the Sanskritik *parampara* naturally included the enactment of dance which was an integral part of drama. In *Trishashtishalakapurushcharita*,¹⁴ Hemachandra offers a detailed description of a dramatic performance which included dance. The other dramas which deserve mention are Yashapala's *Mohaparajayanataka*, Vijayapala's *Draupadiswayamvara*, Someshwara's *Ullagharaghava*. Of these, *Mohaparajaya* was staged in Kumaravihara at Tharade in the year 1176 A.D., and Balachandra's *Karunavijaya* was staged during the *Yatramohotsava* of Rishabhanatha on Shatrunjaya in the year 1221 A.D. *Ullagharaghava* was staged at Dwaraka's Jagat Mandir during the reign of Viradhavala.

The dance sculptures provide tangible evidences of an intangible art. Though situated at different sites and created at different intervals, they present a compact and unified picture of a homogeneous culture that was evolving in Gujarat during the reign of the Hindu kings, when Patan was the seat of government. These sculptures reveal certain characteristic features and belong to a composite geographical area.



1. *Nriyamandapa*, Modhera Temple.

Vachanacharya Sudhakalasha devotes the fifth and the sixth chapters of *SUS* to the art of dancing. It is called *Nriyapaddhatiparikshana adhyaya*. Though the text is critically edited by Dr. U. P. Shah, there is no commentary which can shed more light on the nature of the dance movements. In its absence, a comparison is made of the *SUS* text with various texts like the *Natyashastra (NS)*¹⁵, the *Abhinaya Darpana (AD)*¹⁶, the *SR*, the *MU*, and the *NRK* in order to study the similarities and the variations. The annexed table reveals that, in the main, the *Natyashastra* tradition prevailed with a highly developed *margi* aspect.

We notice that the ceilings of the temples have exquisite carvings of female dancers, the *kinnara*-s and the *gandharva*-s. The women who dance here are more sophisticated. Their elongated limbs, the attenuated waists and the rounded torso leave an impression of remarkable plastic skill. We notice that the *urdhvajanu chari*¹⁷ is most popular and the related movements of the *urdhvajanu karana*¹⁸ are found in many variations. Sometimes, the knee is raised to the level of the chest. In the dance sculptures of Taranga, the *prishthasvastika karana* is depicted profusely and the turning of the torso on *trika* and the *vivartana* of the *kati* are found to be a common feature.¹⁹

The repetition of the *svastika* of the leg from the *sthitavarta chari*²⁰ with the feet either in *samapada*, *kunchita*, *suchi* and *agratalasanchara* with *urdhvangushtha*, mentioned in the *SUS*,²¹ is common in the dance sculptures of all these temples.

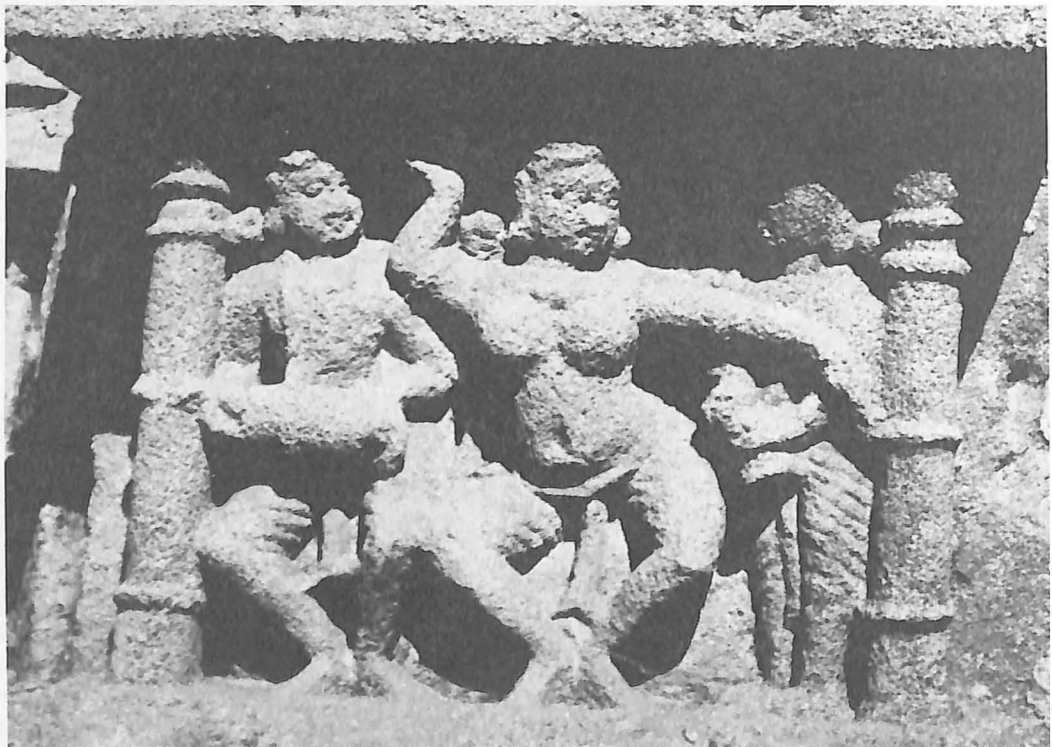


2. A pillar detail in the *sabhamandapa*, Modhera Temple.

The bracket figures, the *shalabhanjika*-s, the *yakshi*-s and the dancers surrounding the seated deities abound in *svastika* positions: Another *chari* often seen is the *baddha chari*.²² We come across examples of *bhujangatrasita*²³, *bhujanganchita*²⁴, and the related movements of the *karana*-s in all the temples. Besides these *karana*-s, the depiction of *unmatta*, *suchi*, *ardhasuchi* and *suchividha karana*-s in the dance scenes from Modhera are noteworthy.

The *karana*-s which suggest movements of walking in the sky, are dealt with by Bharata in the *Natyashastra* while discussing the gait of the flying figures.²⁵ Dr. Vatsyayan has elucidated the concept of the *vrishchika karana*²⁶ emphasising the flexed or the arched tail of the scorpion with the depiction of one leg flexed at the knee, with the lower leg stretched or upturned. The leg with the *samapada* foot supports the weight of the body. The movement is suggested by the leg thrust back with the foot upturned. The stretched leg suggests the dynamic movement of flight.

The examples of the *vrishchika karana*-s and their variations are seen in the sculptures of the Mahaviraswami temple and the Kumbharia group of temples. Four armed deities are depicted, having different attributes and with weapons or objects in their hands. But, their sculptured figures suggest the *vrishchika* of the leg with the bend at the knee in a flexed leg with the raised calf at the hip level.



3. Sculptures in the *sabhamandapa*, Modhera Temple.

The *uromandala*, the *pakshavanchita*, the *hamsasya*, the *pataka*, the *katakamukha* and other *hasta-s* are found sculpted with considerable accuracy. The positioning of the *devangana-s* on the *jangha-s* of the *mandoavara-s* of the *Chaturmukha mahaprasada* temples find accurate description in accordance with the *Kshirarnava* text²⁷. They abound in examples of *Menaka*, *Lilavati*, *Vidhichita*, *Sundari*, *Shubha*, *Hamsa*, *Sarvakala*, *Karpuramanjari* etc.

The *nrityamandapa* of the Modhera temple (1026 A.D.) has several dance sculptures which suggest a strong *Natyashastra* tradition. The temple was dedicated to Surya. The *nrityamandapa*, as the name indicates, was specifically constructed for the dance (Illus. 1). The various pillars depict dancers sculpted in arresting postures.

In Illustration 2, the maiden on the right has *svastika* position of the left foot in *samapada* without any bend at the knee. The *kati* is in *udvahita*. The other



4. Dancer in *baddha chari*, Delwada Temple.

leg in *kunchita pada* when brought down on the ground would form *suchi chari*. The right hand is in *ardhachandra*, resting on the thigh. The left hand with an object is in *pataka*. The head is in *anchita*. According to KSV, the *devangana* with a *kalasha* in the *hasta* is classified as *Jaya devangana*. The maiden on the left is in *urdhvajanu chari*. The left leg is in *samapada* and the right leg is raised in *kunchita*. The *hasta-s* are in *uromandala*, with variations in positions of the fingers. The *vivartana* of the torso is seen with the movement on the *trika*. The *karana* associated with this *chari* is *urdhvajanu karana*.



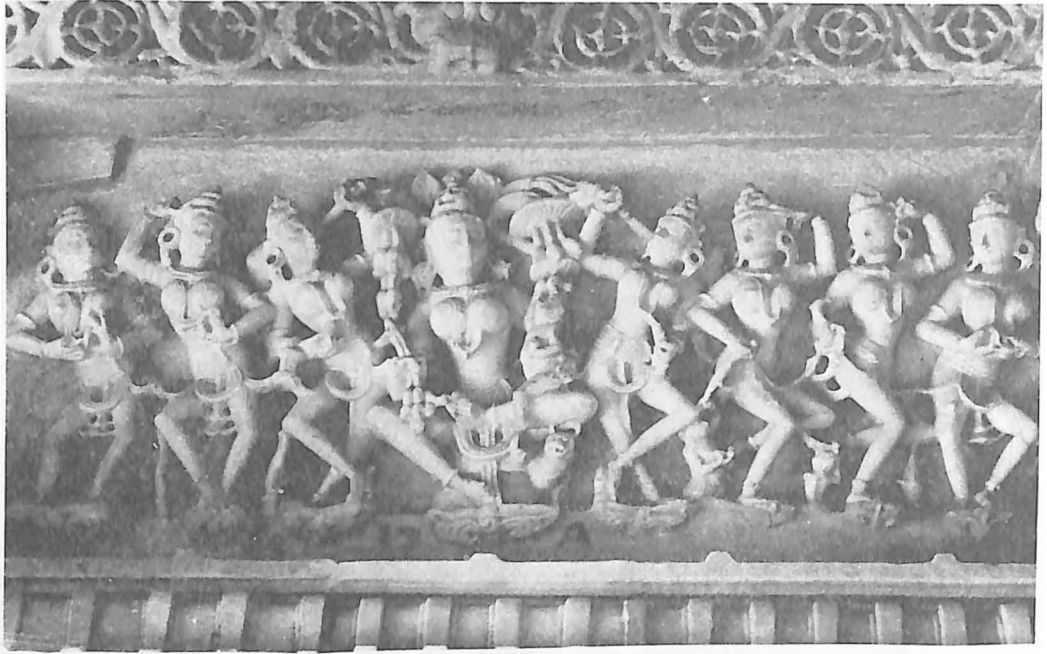
5. Dance sculptures, Parshvanatha Temple, Delwada.

An example of *unmatta karana* is seen in Illustration 3. The *hasta* near the shoulder is in *hamsapaksha* and the other extended arm is in *lata hasta* which suggests a position after a *rechita* movement. The legs are in outward *kshipta* position with the feet in *kunchita*. The head is in *parivahita*. A similar sculpture with a slight variation is found in the Devi temple at Chidambaram.



6. Dance sculptures, Parshvanatha Temple, Delwada.

The Delwada temples on Mount Abu reveal a great variety of dance movements carved with matchless skill in marble. KSV gives the classification of *anjali baddha devangana* as *Chandravali*. Illustration 4 shows the dancer in *baddha chari* with the *svastika* position of the thighs and the shanks, both the feet in *samapada* and the crossing of the knees clearly depicted. In *baddha chari*, the *valana* position and the *svastika* of the thighs are prominent features of movement. The *hasta*-s are in *anjali*. The maidens on either side of the central figure are in *urdhvajanu karana*, with *kshipta* position of the knees.

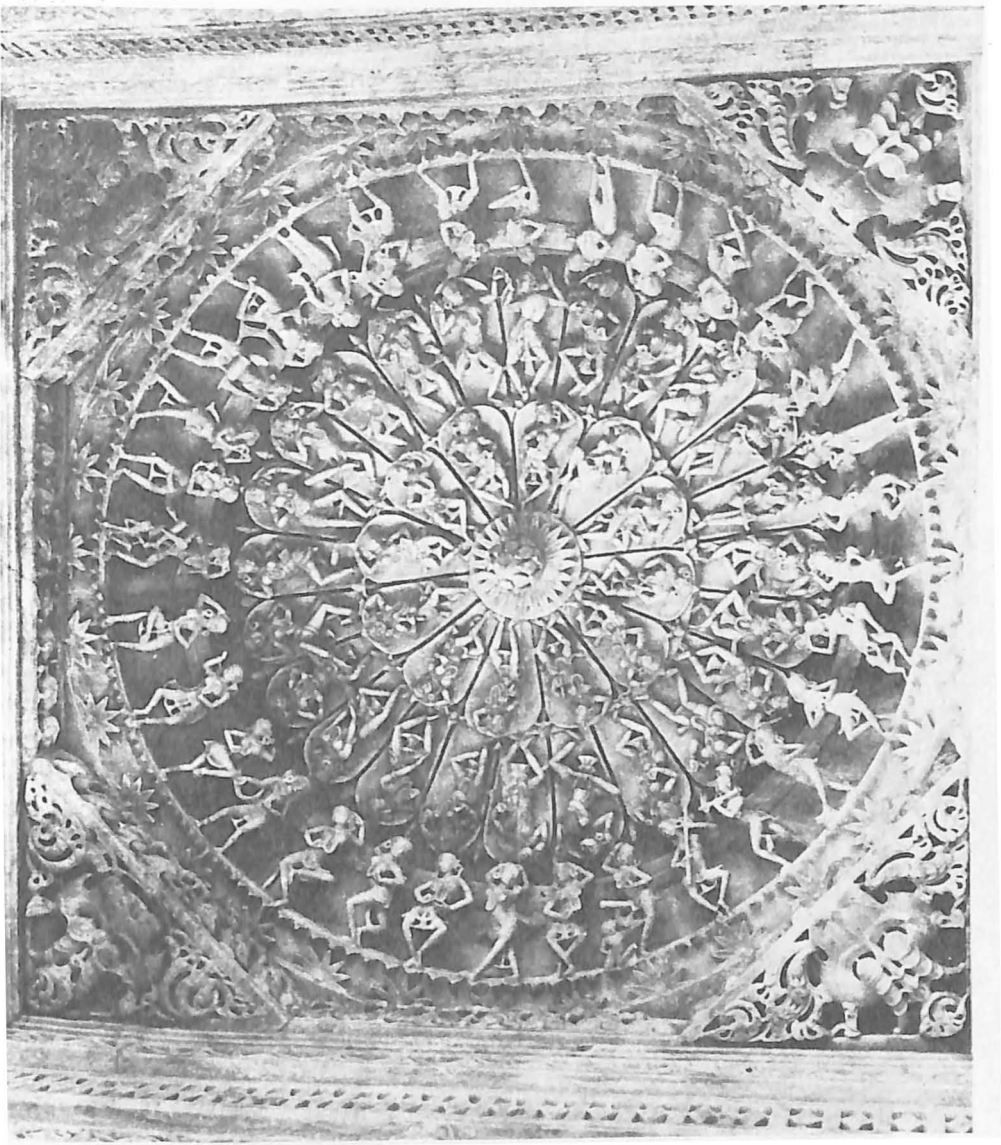


7. Dance scene, Tejal Temple, Delwada.

In another example of *baddha chari* (Illus. 5), the maiden on the left is looking into a mirror. According to KVS, a *devangana* holding a mirror and in a dancing pose is classified as *Vidhichita*. The *hasta* holding the mirror is in *mushti*; the other over the head with a *rechita* and flexion is in *tripataka hasta*. The head is in *nata* and *avadhuta* position. The *parshva* is in *nata* and *prasarita*. The sculpture on the right is of a *nrittamurti* with the *kshipta* of the knees and *svastika* of the feet with the right foot in *agratalasanchara* and separate toes, mentioned in the *SUS* as *urdhvangusththa*. The left leg is in *samapada*. The right arm above the right knee is in *pataka hastà* and the left in *alapallava*.

Another variation of *urdhvajanu karana* (Illus. 6) shows the dancer (on the right) where the right leg is raised at the hip level and rests on the knee of the left leg with the *samapada* foot. The hip is in *udvahita*. The right arm is flexed in an *udvahita* movement with *katakamukha hasta* seen on the *vaksha*. The left arm is seen in a manner after the *karihasta* position. The *urdhvajanu karana* or *chari* does not mention the specific position of the arms. This is an example of both a *chari* and a *karana* which are pronouncedly *urdhvajanu* in nature. The *nrittamurti* to the left has *svastika* of the feet with the right leg in *agratalasanchara*.

A dance scene from the ceiling of the Tejal temple shows dancers surrounding the seated deity in the centre (Illus. 7). The line of the dancers presents a great sense of movement. The two dancers closest to the deity have a *svastika chari* position of the legs with a very clear extension of the torso. Usually, the torso twists round the waist or there is a simple bend. Dr. Vatsyayan observes that this slant of the torso is rare. The other dancers (on the left of the deity) with the lifted leg and the toe held by the dwarf in each case suggest *avartita* or *parshva*



8. Ceiling, Tejal Temple, Delwada.

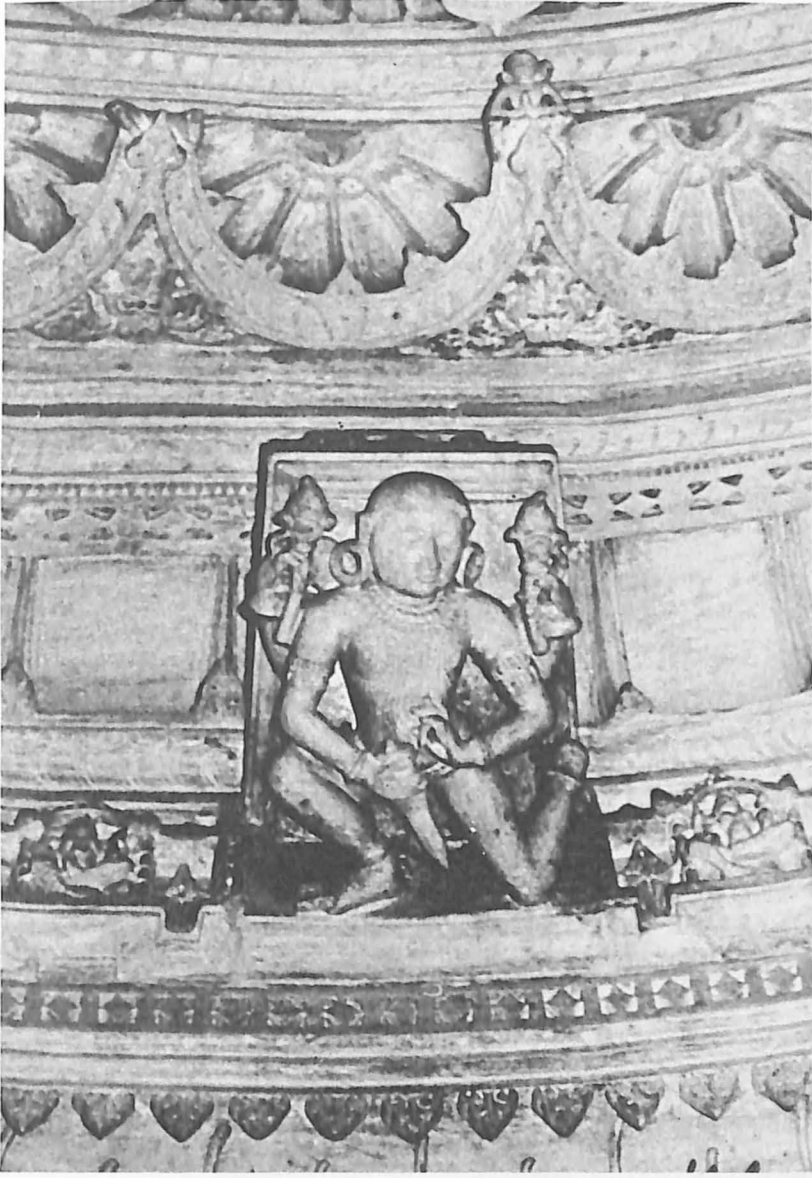
movement. The waist is either turned around in *rechita* or it is almost *vivartita*. In all these figures, the *samapada* foot is clear. The *kunchita* foot in case of the other figures is closer to *agratalasanchara*. The dancers with their legs in a crossed position are in *sthitavarta chari*.

Unparalleled in the execution of the central pendent and superb craftsmanship, the ceilings are absolute marvels of sculpture. The most famous ceiling (Illus. 8), with 32 statuettes on the outer circle of the lotus petals, 24 statuettes in the second inner circle and 12 statuettes in the innermost third circle, is replete with dance movements. From the first big outer circle containing 32 dancers, beginning clockwise from the dancer in *baddha chari*, we come across interesting

examples of *chari* and *karana* movements. The third dancer on the left in *prishthasvastika karana*, the fourth and the sixth in *urdhvajanu karana*, the ninth in *urdhvajanu chari* (an example of *Menaka devangana* according to *KVS*), the eleventh in *syandita chari*, the twenty-eighth in *baddha chari* and the twenty-ninth in *urdhvajanu* with *prishthasvastika* position are depicted with considerable accuracy. In the inner circle, clockwise, the third dancer is seen in *dola hasta* in *chatura karana*,



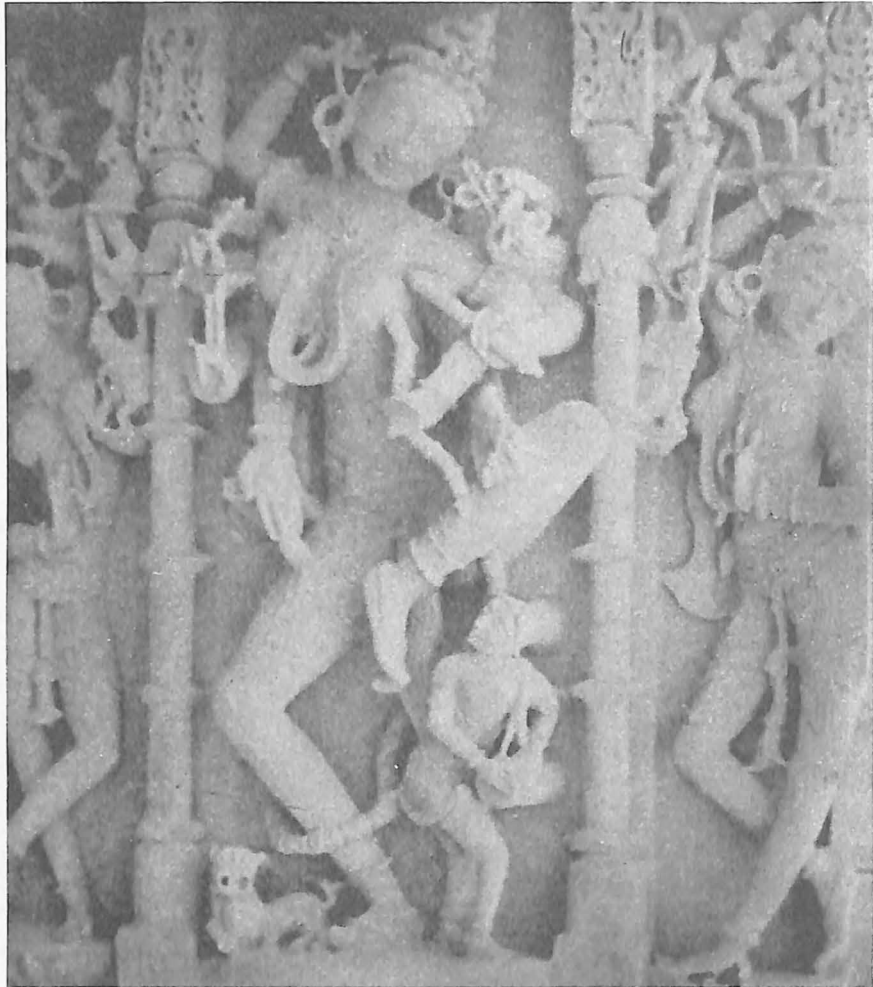
9. *Nrittamurti*, Mahaviraswami Temple, Kumbharia.



10. Sculpture in Mahaviraswami Temple, Kumbharia.

the thirteenth in *prishthasvastika* with *rechita* of the arms, the sixteenth in *kari hasta karana* with *vivartana* of the torso and turning on *trika* and most of the remaining dancers are in *svastika chari*. The noteworthy dancer in the innermost circle is the ninth one in *bhujangatrasita karana*.

A distinct development is found in the sculpting of figures in medieval temples. Most of the figures are seen turning on the axis on *trika*. The *karana*-s suggested are of the *prishthasvastika* variety.



11. *Jwalamalini*, Taranga Temple.

In Illustration 9, we have an example of a *nrittamurti* depicting this movement. The torso is in *vivartita* with the left leg in *samapada* and *kshipta* knee. The right foot is in *agratalasanchara* with the bend at the knee. Of the four arms, the upper arms have *hasta*-s holding the flute in *pataka*. The hand beating the drum is also in *pataka*. The head is in *nata*. This and the next illustration are from the Mahaviraswami temple of the Kumbharia group (1062 A.D.).

The flying figures found in the sculptures come under the discussion of the *vrishchika karana* where the feet are in a flexed position with an arch similar to that seen in the leg of a scorpion. It suggests a significant way of depicting movement through the postures of sitting, kneeling, extensions and flexions which in turn suggest flying and leaping. Some of the *karana*-s in this category are *vrishchika kuttila*, *lata vrishchika*, *vrishchika rechita*, *vrishchika* and *mayuralalita*.

Illustration 10 shows a figure with the right leg bent at the knee with the *samapada* foot placed on the floor on which the weight of the body rests. The

torso is in *nata* position and there is *prasarpita* of the *parshva*. The left leg has the extension with raised calf at the hip level. The right arm has a weapon and the *hasta* is in *mushti*. The other *hasta* is in *tripataka*. The two arms are raised at the back holding a lotus in *katakamukha hasta*. The figure is in *vrishchika karana* giving an impression of flying while sitting on an imaginary seat.

From the Taranga temple (1185 A.D.), the eight-armed dancing goddess (Illus. 11) is seen in *urdhavajanu karana*. Dr. U. P. Shah has identified the goddess as *Jwalamalini* of the Jain pantheon with her vehicle, the *vahana* Bidala, and the various attributes and the *ayudha*-s held in eight arms. The *kshipta* position of the knees is seen with the right leg in *samapada* foot and the raised left leg with *kunchita* and *agratalasanchara* foot position and *urdhavangushtha* toe facing the floor. The arms have several formations, one of which is *uromandala hasta* with *dhanusha* in one hand in *mushti*. The goddess is flanked on either side by two dancers in *svastika chari* and in *uromandala* or *pakshavanchita hasta*-s. The figure on the right has one leg in *samapada* and the one at the back in a cross position in *agratalasanchara* with the *kshipta* position of the knee. Both the dancers have their heads in *nata* position.

The temple, as a focal point of rituals and theatrical performances, and the literature which received impetus from the kings and the merchant class, contributed towards the rich growth of culture during the medieval period in Gujarat. The art of dance also scaled new heights with due emphasis on the *margi* aspect of the *Natyashastra* tradition.

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18. *NS*, Vol. I, Ch. IV, *Shl.* 85, p. 108, *Karana* 25.
19. *NS*, Vol. I, Ch. IV, *Shl.* 76, p. 104, *Karana* 16.
20. *NS*, Vol. II, Ch. IX, *Shl.* 244, p. 86.
21. *NS*, Vol. II, Ch. X, *Shl.* 15, p. 97.
22. *SUS*, *Shl.* 129-134. It is only *SUS* which separates the *pada* and the *padakarma*. The *urdhvangushtha* is seen in sculptures in a pronounced manner.
23. *NS*, Vol. II, Ch. XX, *Shl.* 21, p. 99.
24. *NS*, Vol. I, Ch. IV, *Shl.* 84, p. 108, *Karana* 24.
25. *Ibid.*, *Shl.* 100, p. 114, *Karana* 40.
26. *NS*, Vol. II, Ch. XII, *Shl.* 92-95, p. 152; *NS*, Vol. I, Ch. IV, *Shl.* 107, p. 116, also see *Karana* 47; also see *Classical Dance in Literature and the Arts*, p. 285 and Dr. Vatsyayan's article "Vrishchika Karana: an Intra-Asian Phenomena" in *Journal of the India Society of Oriental Arts (JISOA)* Part II, 1972-73.
27. *KSV*, Ch. XX, *Shl.* 113-16.

TABLE

Pada (Feet)

S. No.	<i>Natyashastra</i>	<i>Abhinaya Darpana</i>	<i>Sangita-ratnakara</i>	<i>Manasollasa</i>	<i>Sangitopanishatsaroddhara</i>	<i>Nrityaratna-kosha</i>
1.	<i>Sama</i>	—	<i>Sama</i>	Except the	—	As in <i>Sangita-ratnakara</i>
2.	<i>Kunchita</i>	—	<i>Kunchita</i>	first three the	<i>Kunchita</i>	
3.	<i>Agratala-sanchara</i>	—	<i>Agratala-sanchara</i>	rest are	<i>Agratala</i>	
4.	<i>Anchita</i>	—	<i>Anchita</i>	mentioned on	—	—
				the lines of the		
				<i>Sangitaratna-kara</i>		
5.	<i>Suchi Parshniga</i>	—	<i>Suchi</i>	One position	—	
				is mentioned		
				as <i>Ninja</i>		
6.	<i>Tryashra</i>	—	—		<i>Padakarma</i>	—
7.	<i>Udghattita</i>		<i>Udghattita</i>		<i>Udghattita</i>	
			<i>Tadita</i>		<i>Urdhvangushtha</i>	
			<i>Ghatitotsedha</i>		<i>Sthanu</i>	
			<i>Ghattita</i>		<i>Ghattita</i>	
			<i>Mardita</i>		<i>Ardhaghattita</i>	
			<i>Agraga</i>		<i>Rechitaghattita</i>	
			<i>Parshniga</i>		<i>Parivesha</i>	
			<i>Parshvaga</i>		<i>Kundala</i>	
					(Note I)	

Note: I It is only *Sangitopanishatsaroddhara* (*SUS*) which separates the *Pada* and the *Padakarma*. As can be seen from the comparative table, the *Udghattitapada* of the *Natyashastra* and the *Sangitaratnakara* is mentioned as *Padakarma* in *SUS*. However, *Urdhvangushtha* is found in the sculptures under review in a very pronounced manner.