

Tanjavur
Brhadīśvara temple **The Monument and
the Living Tradition**

Dance Karaṇas

The different poses of Śiva's dance is portrayed on the first floor of the inner ambulatory space of the main sanctum. 108 projecting stone blocks were provided for during the construction to carve the 108 different nṛtta karaṇa (dance poses). These panels were later carved in-situ. As one goes around the sanctum in circumambulation, these sculptured panels are seen on the inner wall of the ambulatory. The panels with the sculpture are presented in a sequential order and maintain the same level throughout. From the number of stone blocks it is evident that the intention was to carve all the 108 nṛtta karaṇas, but for reasons unknown, only 81 were carved. A close inspection of the carved panels, however, shows that they are in different stages of completion.

On the basis of this number, scholars have rightly come to the conclusion that they represent the 108 poses of nṛtta karaṇa described in Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra. A chapter in the Nāṭyaśāstra gives the description of each of these karaṇas and attempts have been made by eminent scholars to identify them.

It is fascinating that the 108 nṛtta karaṇa were also sculpted on the gopura of the Chidambaram Naṭarāja temple, built in the 12th century. These sculptures were accompanied by inscriptions of corresponding verses from Bharata's Nāṭyaśāstra. This and yet another similar finding in a Cōḷa temple proves that a conscious attempt was made to portray the nṛtta karaṇa in the Cōḷa times.

