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Stages of Dance during Chola Period

Miss Mythilie Arulaiah, M.Phil.

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Introduction

During the Sangam period dances were performed in many places, for example, under the shadow of Vengai and Kaanchi trees, atop the mountains, on streets, in sandy places, on the stages at festivals, stages in the villages, in awnings decorated for the kings and on prestigious stages. During the Post-Sangam period 'Arangam' (stage), after the careful selection of land for it, was constructed maintaining the measurement and structure prescribed by the authors of books of sculpture. Performances were staged as specified by the authors of works on dance. The places in which dances were performed during the Pallava and Paandiya period were called 'Ambalam' and 'Arangam'. Stages were constructed to accommodate hundreds of audience. Dance performances were presented by performing ladies according to the norms of dance with

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five types of teachers of dance among the audience. Temples too became the stages of dance similar to the street-stages, festival stages and stages in the palaces.

Though the stages before the Chola period were of different variety, we could conclude that the stages similar to that of Pallava stages evolved into the stages of various designs in Chola period.

Temples Became the Centres of Art Development

The total number of temples multiplied during the Chola period. The art forms which gained prominence inside the temples commenced to prosper. Temples were the centres of art development. They were constructed with various structural attachments like Thirumanchana maNdapam (hall for bathing the stature of God), Thiruvolakka maNdapam (congregation hall), ThirukkaavaNam and Niruththa maNdapam (hall of dance). A statement of Ira.Kalaikovan (2003) which reads as “stone inscriptions prove that all the maNdapas of temples, except Thirumanchana maNdapam, were used as stages by the dance composers and dancers” depicts the influence temples had on the stages during Chola period, the high status they enjoyed during that time, the ways of maintenance of their purity and the reverence given to them (p.174).

Chola Support for Dance

All the Chola Kings, who were Saivite devotees, patronized the dance desired by Lord Thillai Natarajan. They founded many cultural institutions consisting dancing ladies and others by granting donations. Undoubtedly temples became the centres of growth for dance. As the number of performances of dance and forms of Koothus increased and since the Chola Kings had high level commitment for dance, it would have been essential for having many stages at that time.

Therefore it would be appropriate to examine the different types of stages of dance during the Chola period under the categories of Niruththa maNdapas (hall of Niruththa) , Sathursaalais (halls of dance), Naadakasaalai (halls of plays), ThirukkaavaNam, Thiruvolakka maNdapam (congregation hall), Arangam and Ampalam.

Niruththa MaNdapam

Messages on several Niruththa maNdapas are available in the epigraphs at Chola temples in Tamilnadu. “Some of these Niruththa maNdapas were called Sathirsaalai and Nadakasaalai” (Kalaikovan.Ira,2003, p.174). Another epigraph reads as “... Ilankeswara Thevan constructed a niruththa maNdapam at Virinchipuram Maarkkasakaayeswarar Temple” (ARE 1939-40:1192). Another one depicts that “a Niruththa maNdapam was constructed during the thirteenth year of the rule of King Rajarajan I at Naankupattimadaththu temple” (ARE 1914-399). A Chola epigraph at Kuraiyoor Swarnapureeswarar temple explicates that Rajaraja Kovalaraayan constructed the temple with stone and completed it with Thirumanchana maNdapam and Niruththa maNdapam. Panguni festival was celebrated at an extravagant scale in this temple.

Another epigraph reads as “a village named UkaLoork Koottaththu Thirugnaanasampanthanallur was donated to meet the expenses of music and dance performances conducted and for the expenses of poojas during this festival” (ARE 1918:93-94). We could infer from this statement that the dances were performed at the niruththa maNdapas of this temple and these niruththa maNdapas were catering as the stages for dance performances. Thiruvaakkeeswaramudaiya nayanaar temple in Veloor also had niruththa maNdapam. This is known by an “epigraph which proves that the niruththa maNdapa was constructed by Asoornaattu Soundariya Chalapura Thiththan”(ARE. 1919:108). There were two niruththa maNdapas at Parvathakireeswarar temple at Kunraadarkovil. One of them was built by a government official called Cholanaadaazhvaan. This temple is a rock temple which has many maNdapas, existing to date, in front of it and on its right. As the inscription about the niruththa maNdapas is on the northern wall of the hall which is in front of the rock temple, we could assume that this particular maNdapa is one of the two niruththa maNdapas. There is ample space for dance among the pillars of this maNdapa. The other is a big hall that provides huge space for dancing. We could infer that dances were performed in these maNdapas from the inscription that reads as “there were ladies of dance at this temple and they served God with their dance performances” (ARE. 1914:357).

There was a niruththa maNdapa at the Mahaalingaswamy temple at Thiruvidadimaruthoor during the reign of King Vikkramachola. There were twenty chandeliers consisting of eight lamps and two set of sash-lamps consisting of hundred and twenty lamps. Epigraphs on stones depict that there were similar lamps at the niruththa maNdapas and they substantiate that the

niruththa maNdapas were brightly illuminated by numerous lamps. In addition to this there was another stone inscription that proves the existence of many Thalaikkoliyar (leading dancers/choreographers) and Pathiyilar (women appointed to serve God with dance).

We could conclude, by synthesizing the data of these two inscriptions, that the niruththa maNdapas of Thiruvidadaimaruthoor temple served as stages of performances of music and dance. There is a niruththa maNdapa which was built during the Chola period, existing to date, at an ancient and prestigious Sivan temple in AkaNda Nallur which was called AraiyaNi Nallur earlier.

Therefore it is brought to the limelight by these inscriptions that the temples, constructed by the Chola kings incorporating the unique qualities of architecture, mostly consisted of niruththa maNdapas.

Sections of Bharathanatya and Origin of the Word ‘Niruththa’

Niruththa, Niruththya and Natya are three sections of Barathanatya. The ‘Niruththya’ is a word closely related to Natya. Niruththobasaara, i.e., worshipping God by offering dance, is one of the sixteen honours offered to God. Therefore it is obvious that the word Niruththa is closely related to dance and the maNdapa in which the Niruththa was offered was called Niruththa maNdapa. We can infer from the stone inscriptions that the Niruththa maNdapa was one of the dance stages during the Chola period.

Sathur Saalai (Hall of Sathur)

There was a hall named Rajendran Sathursalai at SheNpakeswarar temple in Naththam. Members of Samvathsara board of Nikarilichchola Sathurvethi Mangalam held board meetings in this hall and had discussions about the activities of the village. Members of Saaththanoor board met at a similar hall at Komuktheeswarar temple in ThiruvaavaduthuRai and announced, on behalf of the templar, a land for the requirements of Niruththya. “Kumaran SrikaNdan who had SaakkaikkaaNi in Saaththanoor donated this Niruththyapokam land for performing seven portions of Aariyakkoorthu” (ARE. 1912:262, 1925:120).

Only two Sathursaalais at SheNpakeswarar temple and Komuktheeswarar were mentioned in the epigraphs during the reigns of King Rajarajan I and King Rajendran I. Initially the word ‘Sathir’ was used to refer to dance. Therefore the word Sathur should be considered as a variant of the word Sathir. Sathir is dancing to the rhythmic words (Jathi). V.K.P. Suntharam has explained the root of this word by referring to a Thevaram of Thirugnanasampanthar.

“... sathivazhi varuvathOr sathiré ” (Sathi / Dance evolving from Jathi)

V.K.P. Suntharam says (2004) “here Sathi refers to the Jathis (word-constructed by drum-beats) like ‘thaa thee thakathinathOm. Sathir is dancing to the Jathis. Thirugnanasampanthar’s line ‘Dance evolving from Jathi’ seems to explain the word Sathir”(p.271). Sri AandaL (885 AD), who was a successor of Thirugnaana Sampanthar, too referred to Sathir in her Naachchiyaar Thirumozhi. When she sang, she uttered,

‘...Sathiri ILa mangaiyar thaam vanthu ethir kolla...’

(...welcomed by young ladies of Sathir...) .

“What is notable here is that she used the word Sathir to refer to dance”(Aazhvarkal, 1959, p.101) Therefore it is clear that the Sathursaalais at Naththam SheNpakeswarar temple and ThiruvaavaduthuRai Komuktheswarar temple were Sathirsalai (halls of Sathir) and they were the places for performing dances. Therefore we could conclude that Sathirsalai was a type of stages of dances during the Chola period.

Natakasaalai (Hall of Plays)

There were many stages for dance which were called Natakasaalai. Two epigraphs declare that there was a stage called ‘Naanaavitha Natakasaalai’ (hall of Miscellaneous Plays) in ThiruvaavaduthuRai. One of those epigraphs elaborates “the actions taken for the maintenance of the particular Natakasaalai” (ARE 1925:152).

Thiruvathikai Veerattaanam has the architecture designs similar to the temples of the Pallava period. Dances were performed by Devaradiyaar (Devdasis) and Pathiyilaars in the hall of hundred pillars of this temple. “...Pathiyilar shall dance if the screen was lifted earlier and Devaradiyar shall dance if the screen is lifted afterwards at an occasion when Kooththar and

Nayagar, who were unapproachable to the Mudaliyar of the Hall of Hundred Pillars, appeared in the hall at Thiruveerattanamudiya Naayanaar temple” (SII 8:333). This affirms the truth that the halls of hundred pillars and halls of thousand pillars were used as the stages of dances those days.

There was a hall of plays at the Mahaalingaswamy temple at Thiruvudaimaruthoor during the period of King Paranthakan I. There were chandeliers of oil lamps and sash-lamps at this hall of plays. The epigraphs at this temple depict that there were numerous Thalaikkoliyar and Pathiyilar in this temple. It is clearly proved by this information that there dance and music performances were held daily at the hall of plays at Thiruvudaimaruthoor temple.

There was a hall of plays named “Azhakiya Paandiyam Koodam” at Somanaatheswara temple, Aaththoor, Thirunelveli. An inscription at this temple illustrates that “Shaanthik kooththu had been performed there since long ago and this place had been renovated during the period of Sripallava Pandiyan and Devadaasi ThirumenipiriyaathaL of this temple was given two huge lands for performing plays on any day during the AavaNi festival” (ARE 1929-30: 439, 444).

It is proved that these halls of plays also catered as the stages of dances of Devadasis. We are able to deduce that there were many dance performances in the temples under the patronage of the Kings and the repertoires were performed in the illuminations of lamp lights. These halls of dances were depicted in literature as ‘hall of plays in which ladies like young peacocks performing nice dances...’, ‘...place where ladies of golden bangles perform plays’ and ‘place where plays are performed by talented ladies wearing various jewels’. All these evidences prove that the halls of plays were used as stages of dance as well, during the Chola period.

ThirukkaavaNam

Many of the temples in Chola period had ThirukkaavaNams. Epigraphs prove that ThirukkaavaNams too have catered to needs of the dance performances. “The maNdapas of Devadasis at Thiruvaaroor Thiyaagarajaswamy temple were called ‘Devadasi ThirukkaavaNam’ during Chola period” (Kalaikkovan.Ira, 2003 , p.213). When God Siva came to this hall,

Poonkoyil Naayagath Thalaikkoli, one of the Pathiyilars, performed a dance repertoire. “Another person called Poonkoyil Nambi wrote songs entitled ‘VeeraNukka Vijayam’ about the servants of God” (Kalaikkovan.Ira, 2003, p.179). This proves that Poonkoyil Nambi had the talents of dancing and singing. An inscription says that “God Veethividankaswamy of this temple came to the hall of Devadasis and watched the dance performance of PukkaththuRai Vallapath Thalaikkoli ,one of the Pathiyilars of this temple” (Kalaikkovan.Ira, 2003, p.180). Statue of Veethividankaswamy was brought to the ThirukkaavaNam and was placed on the throne on a Sunday in the month of Chiththirai by the Templar for the specially celebrated Chathayam festival. One of the Pathiyilars, depending on the templar, called ‘Thiyaaka Vinothath Thalaikoli’ performed in the presence of God Thiyaagarajaswamy. These three inscriptions show that Thalaikoliyars from Pathiyilaars were special people who had the privilege of dancing in front of God. Therefore the epigraphs help us to conclude that the ThirukkaavaNams of Devadasis at Thiruvaaroor were catering to the dance and music performances during the Chola period, artists excelled in their performing arts were honoured in front of the God there and ThirukkaavaNam was not only a place for music and dance but also for the God to appear before the congregation and shower blessings to devotees.

Thiruvolakka MaNdapam (Congregation Hall)

Thirolvolakka maNdapas of Aathipooreeswarar temple at Thiruvottiyoar exist to date. One of them was known as Rajarajan maNdapa those days. During the AavaNi festivals God appeared before the congregation in the Thiruvolakka maNdapa and dance repertoires and music recitals were performed in front of God. Epigraphs prove that even the Chola Emperors came to the Thiruvolakka maNdapa to watch the dances of introvert nature and kooththus of fun. “There was a Thiruvolakka maNdapa at ThirukkaRaayil temple. This was built during the twenty seventh year of the reign of King Rajarajan I. Only the pillars of the maNdapa remain to date” (Tharumapura Aatheenam. 1957, pp.9,67). Epigraphs on the pillars of the Thiruvolakka maNdapa show that the maNdapa was serving as Niruththa maNdapa at Selam Sukavaneswarar temple and it was built by mountain people of Malai maNdapa” (SII, 4:144).

There was a Thiruvolakka maNdapa at Kanchipuram Mayaanamudaiyaar temple. There were music and dance performances during the festivals. There were special poojas on the days

of full moon and new moon in the month of Maasi (February). It is clearly depicted by the epigraphs that during the festival seasons the statue of God Siva was brought before the congregation and was placed in the Thiruvolakka maNdapa. Pathiyilars and Devadasis performed dance repertoires and Gandharvas (devotional singers) presented music in that occasion. It is clear that the Kings too assembled in these Thiruvolakka maNdapas to watch music and dance performances when such performances were on stage. All these messages help to deduce that the Thiruvolakka maNdapas too served as the stages of dance.

Arangam (Stage)

Some of the temples constructed by Chola Kings had stages and mandapas with stages for the purpose of conducting music and for dance performances. A stone inscription belonging to the period of King Paranthakan illuminates that there were performances of kooththus and music at Kothandarameswarar temple in Thondaimaanaadu and it tells further about a carpenter who repaired the stage. “This Arangam is a stage built for kooththu and for singing” (SII, 8:529). There were Thiruvaadarangu (stage of holy dance) and Niruththa maNdapa at Vaithyanathaswamy temple in Thirumazhpaadi. An epigraph proves that this maNdapa, which was in a damaged condition during King Kuloththunga III, was “renovated by Ethirili Chola Moovantha VeLaar” (ARE. 1920-99). We are able to deduce from these that the stages were renovated for uninterrupted performances of dances.

An epigraph found in the Senchadainatheswara temple at Thirumaal Ukanthan Fort tells about an agreement between Srirudras and dancing ladies of the temple. This epigraph speaks of the privileges given to the dancing ladies and their heirs and it calls those ladies as ‘Thiruvarangiruntha PeNdukaL’ (women of holy stages). Therefore we are enlightened that there was a stage in this temple. Another epigraph reports that “there was holy stage in ThirunedungkaLam Sivan temple and it was built by King VallaLa Thevar” (ARE. 1931: 32, 52).

It would be appropriate to note that the literature of Chola period referred to the dance stages as ‘Arangu’ and the dancing ladies as ‘Arangak KooththikaL’. Another epigraph, belonging to the year 1446 A.D. at Ponnammaraavathy Sunthararaasa Perumal temple, is in the form of a poem and it speaks greatly of the dance performance of a dancing woman called Emperumaan AdiyaaL Seeranga Naachchi as follows,

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“ ... arangeRi avai mathikka aadinaaLe” (IPS. 781)

(danced on stage gaining the respect of the audience). Thus, this inscription also proves that there were dance stages in the temples and there were dancers who had the talents of performance that were respected by the audience.

It is obvious that the stages built in the temples of Chola period had dance and music performances, the damaged stages were renovated for the continuation of dance performances and they catered to the performances of dancers who gained great respect from the audience. All these information prove that the Arangams served as the important places where dance repertoires were presented during the Chola period.

Ambalam

A line from Seevakasinthamani refers to dancing Ambalam and it depicts that the Ambalams were also utilized to perform dances. The authors of ThirumuRais began calling Siva, the Lord of dance, as ‘Ambalak Kooththan’, and Thillai, where he performs dance, as ‘Thillaiambalam’. This helps to infer that the Ambalam is a place for dance and it is related to devotional dancing. During the latter part of Chola reign the worship of the God Siva, the Lord of dance, gained precedence. Thillai Ponnambalavan, the maestro of dance, became the God of the clan of the Chola Kings. It was a Chola King who covered the roof with golden tiles. Chola epigraphs enlighten us that not only the place of dance of Siva, the dance-maestro, but also the places of performance of dancing ladies in Chola period were called Ambalam. Therefore it could be concluded that the Ambalams too served as stages of dance during the Chola period.

Another early Chola period epigraph, which was found deformed in a Vishnu temple, reads as “the board has donated lands to maintain an Ambalam that existed in the village” (ARE. 1937: 38, 387). A rock inscription, near Thimichchoor Sivan temple belonging to the reign of Aathiththa Karikaalan, indicates that there was an Ambalam in the village and land was donated to illuminate it with oil lamps. An epigraph of King Rajarajan I, found in Punkanoor Sivan temple, declares that Ponnaian, son of Thiruvaroo Adikal, had built an Ambalam named ‘VeeraChola’ and granted lands to the temple to illuminate the Ambalam with oil lamps. “Mummudich Cholan Perambalam was built at the Valampuranaathar temple in Melap

Perumpallam” (ARE. 1940-41:9). Therefore we conclude that the halls, which were called Ambalams during the Chola period, were also catering to the needs of dance performances of dancing ladies.

Conclusion

Chola period was the golden era of the evolution of art forms in the history of Tamils. During this time, dance too had its unique growth. As dance is a performing art, it should definitely have a space to accommodate its audience. Such space was called Arangam (stage). Arangu is very important for any dance repertoire that was performed in any time of the history. These Arangus were differently designed according to the socioeconomic conditions of the society. Thus the Arangu of the Chola period could be considered to be of seven categories mentioned above.

As the number of dance performances increased during the Chola period, it would have been essential to have stages of dance. While PaaNars, Pidaarars, and Kaantharvars sang songs on these stages, Pathiyilaar, ThaLiyilaar, Thevaradiyaar, and ThaLichcheri women danced to those songs. Thus we assume that the dances were performed to their songs. There were performances of ladies dancing to the music of Veena, Flute, and Drums like Udukkai and MaththaLam. Therefore the dance stages of Chola period was a whole one with dancing ladies, musicians and artists of drums.

From the messages which show that there were lamps lit during the night in these stages of dances, we could conclude that the dance repertoires were presented day and night. The Chola Kings were present in those stages to enjoy the music and dance performances. The stages of Chola period were prestigious as they had even the Kings among its audience. As the halls of hundred pillars and thousand pillars were utilized as stages, those stages could be considered beautiful ones with a system of using screens as mentioned earlier.

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