1. Introduction

[…] the symbolism and iconography of Indian art can almost always be referred to Vedic formulations. Apart from these sources, the symbolism and iconography cannot be explained but only described.

A.K. Coomaraswamy

But it [Bharata śāstra] is like the Union science (Yoga-śāstra) which is the means of attaining spiritual freedom (mokṣa)

Maḍabhūshi Tiruvenkaṭa of Nīḍamaṅgalam,

This work is born as an attempt to answer the following questions: are the dance sculptures represented on the Hindu temples talking to the bhakta-s, the devotees who go to the temple? If this is the case, is dance the language they use to communicate with them? And what are they saying?

My first interest in the topic of the relationship between dance and sculptures goes back to my studying years as an undergraduate in Indian art and archaeology and in particular to a specific circumstance. In his volume “The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent”, at some point Harle remarks how the body language of dance is invariably used in shaping the Hindu sculptures, even when they are not actually dancing. This accidental note made a deep impression on me. The fact that in Hindu art sculptures are not arbitrarily carved nor do they merely follow decorative principles struck me deeply. Soon after, I began to work for my MA thesis on the
dance postures carved in the Hoysaḷeśvara temple at Halebid, choosing this particular temple because of the considerable presence of dance amongst its sculptures. This first attempt to deal with the topic of traditional dance and traditional sculpture was more or less limited to a compilation of postures and movements based on the traditional dance sources. Nevertheless, it sowed the seeds of the future interests and research: while trying to read the postures and movements carved in the stone, I realized that the use of the dance language endows the sculptures with a variety and richness of meanings that go far beyond the simple modulations of the limbs. Hence the need for a deeper and more complete study.

This thesis includes three parts. The first part is a study of the theoretical meanings of traditional dance and its relationship with the temple sculptures and the temple itself. The second part is a detailed analysis of the dance movements and postures found in the sculptures of a number of selected temples built by the Hoysaḷa-s in the Southern part of Karnataka. Finally, the third part is the application of the theoretical results on the temple sculptures in order to verify them and use them to answer the questions posed in the beginning.

Traditional Dance

Traditional dance is part of the śruti-smṛti-paramparā, the traditional system of knowledge and is codified in a corpus of texts (śāstra-s) dealing with dance (nṛtta), music (saṅgita) and theatre (nāṭya). Amongst them, the Nāṭyaśāstra of Bharatamuni is the most authoritative and comprehensive. In the framework of the śruti-smṛti-paramparā, dance is one of the sixty-four traditional arts (catuh-śaṣṭi kalā-s); these sixty-four arts are considered Upa-veda-s, or minor Veda-s, and are part of a structure
that has its source in the sacred Prāṇava or Oṃkāra. From Oṃkāra ensued the Veda-s and the whole system of knowledge systematized in the Brāhma-s, the Āraṇyaka-s, the Upaniṣad-s, the Purāṇa-s down to the Upa-veda-s. In this way, framed in this perfectly coherent structure, arts necessarily share the content, origin and aim of the Veda-s. It is in this sense that dance too was meant to represent the path of reintegration of the individual soul into the Supreme and was considered fit for the association with the most sacred structure: the Hindu temple. This association of the temple with dance was mainly twofold: on one hand, dance was performed in the temple by appointed temple dancers and on the other hand, dance was represented in the temple sculptures.

Through aesthetics, traditional dance symbolized the process of initiation and spiritual emancipation. This is stated in the traditional scriptures, in their commentaries and in the explanations of authoritative teachers. These three are indeed the sources for this study, which takes into account, one by one as well as in their mutual relationship, all the elements involved in the shape and meaning of the dancing sculptures: their iconography, their dancing postures and the architecture where they are installed. In general, the postures and movements of dance are invariably used to represent the gods, goddesses and the other celestial beings of the Hindu pantheon when they are endowed with a human body. In particular, dance is an essential characteristic of the Apsaras-es, the celestial female dancers, whose meaning and essence turns out to be one with the meaning and essence of dance itself. In this way the investigation on the meaning and iconography of the Apsaras-es paves for me the way to show how the movements of dance constitute a fully developed language. In fact, the postures and movements of dance act like the voice of the sculptures, the
language in which the sculptures speak to the devotees in order to convey their spiritual meaning.

Analysis of the Sculptures

My analysis of the dance sculptures is based on Vatsyayan's pioneering work, especially her work on dance in literature and the arts (1968) and on the dance sculptures of the Śāraṅgaṇapāṇi temple at Kumbakonam (1982). Vatsyayan's knowledge and insight on traditional arts and in particular on the Nāṭyaśāstra make her work an essential landmark in this field of study. Although dealing but occasionally with the Hoysaḷa sculptures, Vatsyayan's method of analysis can be successfully borrowed in any attempt to identify dance postures and hence her classification of the karaṇa-s according to the leg movement is the base for my reading of the dance movement carved in the sculptures considered in this work.

Other scholars and authors have dealt more specifically with the dance represented in the Hoysaḷa sculptures. Two Ph.D. thesis from the University of Mysore were dedicated to the topic of the dance movements carved in the Hoysaḷa temples: Hema Govindarajan (1983) and Swarupa Nadig (1990). The first is unpublished. Both deal with the identification of the dance movements in the temple sculptures. While Govindarajan treats the topic of the relationship between dance and sculptures in more general terms, Nadig's work aims at providing a general survey of the dance movements represented in the major Hoysaḷa temples. This last dissertation is written from a dancer perspective and its main focus is clearly to show the contribution of ancient sculptors to the contemporary practice of Indian dance. Unfortunately the very poor quality of the printing makes it quite difficult for the
reader to follow her analysis. Nevertheless, the work stands as an interesting attempt to systematize the subject of dance representations in the Hoysala temples. Nandagopal's work (1990) on the dance and music in the temples is also aimed at a general discussion on the topic of the relationship between dance and sculptures by showing a very useful compilation of the dance and its correlated apparatus of ornaments and music instruments.

With respect to these works, my aim is to try to offer a more complete investigation of the dance sculptures in order to show how their purpose can be understood only if they are considered and analyzed in the framework of the traditional meaning of the Hindu temple. According to this view, the temple is a place where Vedic formulations are made accessible to every devotee through the representation of *rasa* and *bhāva* both in the context of temple structure (architecture and sculptures) and temple rituals (amongst which: the dance of the *devadāsī*-s).

My analysis is mainly aimed at unveiling some of the elaborate symbolic meanings of that portion of the traditional dance that is mentioned in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* as the *kaiśikī* style of dance, or the dance of the *Apsaras*-es. I try to do this by strictly following the traditional sources and by keeping all the time and as much as possible the point of view of the *bhakta*, that is to say the person for whom the sculptures are meant. Although the possible symbolic meanings of the other main style of traditional dance, the *taṇḍava*, are also hinted at, I leave this extremely wide and complex topic for further research.

A last remark on the editions of the *Nāṭyaśāstra* used for this thesis: all the references to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* are to the Nag edition translated by Unni (1998), while the references to *Abhinavabharāṭī* are to the Parimal edition, published in 1998. Even
though I am aware that these are not the easiest to find nor the most complete editions of the above texts, they were those available to me at the beginning of the writing process, when due to the circumstances of my living in an isolated setting, it was not possible to me for access other sources.