Preface

The topic I have chosen for my research is a very deep and interesting one. The purpose of my work is to make a detailed study of sculptures in some of the chosen temples in the town of Kumbakonam, in Tanjavur district in Tamil Nadu, in relation to dance. This involves a vast in-depth study of the conditions prevailing at the time of construction of these temples, dance prevailing during those times, the dancing girls and their status, why dance was immortalized in the sculptures in the temples, the connection between Nāṭya Śāstra and related texts and iconography and the analysis of these sculptures to identify the dynamic movements in them as Karāṇas (if at all there are any).

To understand the topic of my research in the right perspective it is important to make a study of the political history of the ancient Tamil Kingdom, the main religious cults (Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śākta) which prevailed during these times and the socio-economic conditions and life styles. It is also important to study who were the builders of these temples, when were these temples built, what was the purpose, what kind of activities took place there, how dancing images got intricately woven with temple architecture and how were dance and temples related.

Dance cannot be separated from the temples. The images of the deities were depicted in dance Mudrās and postures. Dance movements were carved all around the temples. The dancing girls in the form of Devadāsīs were also maintained in the temple premises. So deep was the relationship between dance and temples. A real understanding of the classical dance form lies in the correct understanding of temples. Stories from mythology were also carved and painted in the temples. Our ancient temples have deep mysteries to be unraveled and several stories to be unfolded. Therefore it is a small attempt on my part to research some of the important temples of Kumbakonam in the right perspectives and study their relation to classical dance.

Kumbakonam being a town with a temple to boast of in each street, seemed the right choice to research and understand the deep relationship between temples and dance. Since my family deity’s temple is also in Kumbakonam I have had a chance to visit several other temples also in the town. Seeing the rich magnificent temples with beautiful sculptures created a sense of awe and a need to understand the rich legacy.