PREFACE

India is an ancient land with a unique civilization and culture. The uniqueness of her culture is self-evident in her aesthetic evocation, creative intelligence, philosophy and religion as is expressed in and through her literature and arts. The magnificent Hindu temples in the country stand as the epitome of ancient Indian civilization and culture. The icons of gods and goddesses installed in the temples manifest the transcendental presence of the Divine among the devotees. The divine blessings bring mokṣa or liberation to the devotees.

The icons of the temple deities are made with the sole purpose of religious worship or arca. The unique characteristic of these icons is that they are made following the principles of Indian iconography, and they radiate divine beauty. What has captured the attention of the researcher is that the main icons or the mūla beras and the other icons in the temples portray certain dance postures that are found in Bharatanatyam. Hence, a study of the relationship between Bharatanatyam and Hindu iconography is pursued in this thesis.

This thesis entitled “The Significance of the Mūla Beras in the Hindu Temples of Tamilnadu with Special Reference to Bharatanatyam and Hindu Iconography” is an attempt to study the relationship between Bharatanatyam and Hindu iconography with Hindu temples as their common platform. Bharatanatyam is one of the ancient classical dance styles of India. It is intimately related to Hinduism. Iconography is that branch of knowledge that deals with the representative art such as figures, portraits, artistic images or symbols, and pictures. Hindu iconography follows the strict rules laid down for making images of gods and goddesses that are installed in the Hindu temples. The bodily postures of the chief deity in the garbhagṛha (sanctum sanctorum) of a temple are modeled after the iconographical rules prescribed in the ṣilpa ṣāstras (scientific treatises on iconography). It is astonishing to see that the icons depict amazing dancing postures. The deities with perfect iconometry have a deep spiritual significance for the devotees as each position of the hands, feet, head, and the body as a whole bestows a loving grace to the devotees.
I chose this topic to obtain a deeper understanding of the religious significance and aesthetic evocation of the various postures of the icons in the garbhagṛha; and also to gain knowledge about how these two sacred arts, Bharatanatyam and Iconography, help the devotee to come closer to God. With the guidance of sthapatis or sculptors and temple priests, I have tried to enter deeply into this subject. Though this study is based on the traditional arts, it aims at evoking aesthetic delight in the reader in an innovative way.

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