



# The Development of Dance Before and After the Vijayanagara Empire

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## Abstract

The evolution of Indian dance has been deeply intertwined with the cultural, religious, and socio-political developments of various dynasties. The Vijayanagara Empire (1336–1646) played a significant role in the patronage and proliferation of classical dance forms, leaving a lasting impact on the tradition. This article explores the trajectory of dance before and after the Vijayanagara period, analyzing its transformation in terms of style, themes, and patronage. Special attention is given to the Lepakshi temple, which stands as a testament to the grandeur of dance and artistic expression during this era.

## Keywords

Dance history, Vijayanagara Empire, Bharatanatyam, temple dance, Devadasi system, Lepakshi temple, cultural heritage, Natya Mantapa, temple sculptures, dance gurus

## Introduction

Dance in India has been an intrinsic part of religious and cultural life, with roots tracing back to the Natya Shastra, an ancient Sanskrit treatise attributed to Bharata. Before the Vijayanagara Empire, classical and folk dance forms flourished under different dynasties, mainly within temple precincts. The Chola, Pandya, and Kakatiya rulers were notable patrons of dance, particularly in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. Dance was codified under the guidance of renowned gurus, and temple sculptures played a vital role in preserving dance postures and gestures. The grandeur of temples like Lepakshi reflects the importance of dance in religious and royal patronage. Post-Vijayanagara, dance traditions faced a decline due to changing socio-political conditions but later revived with renewed interest in the 20th century.

## Dance Before the Vijayanagara Empire

Before the Vijayanagara period, dance was primarily a sacred art form, closely associated with temple rituals. The Chola dynasty (9th–13th century) played a crucial role in formalizing Bharatanatyam as a temple dance, with inscriptions and sculptures in temples like Chidambaram attesting to its prominence. The Devadasi system, wherein women were dedicated to temple service through dance and music, was prevalent. Dance was performed as a spiritual offering, with themes drawn from Hindu epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

Gurus such as Bharata Muni (author of Natya Shastra) and later Abhinavagupta refined the codification of dance, emphasizing 'Rasa' (emotional expression) and 'Bhava' (gestures). Sculptors meticulously recorded dance movements in temple carvings, evident in the Chidambaram temple and the Hoysala temples at Belur and Halebidu. The Kakatiya rulers supported Perini Shivatandavam, a vigorous dance dedicated to Lord Shiva, emphasizing

warrior-like energy.

### Dance During the Vijayanagara Empire

The Vijayanagara Empire, founded in 1336 by Harihara I and Bukka Raya I, marked a golden age for Indian arts, including dance. The rulers were known for their devotion to Hinduism, which reflected in their extensive patronage of dance and temple rituals. Court dancers, often referred to as 'Rangabhoga,' performed in royal courts as well as temple festivals, blurring the lines between religious and entertainment-oriented dance.

### Lepakshi Temple: A Testament to Dance Culture

One of the finest examples of Vijayanagara architecture, the Lepakshi temple in Andhra Pradesh, provides invaluable insights into the dance culture of the era. The temple's intricately carved pillars depict celestial dancers, musicians, and mythological performances, showcasing the elaborate movements and costumes of classical dance. The famed 'Natya Mantapa' (dance hall) at Lepakshi is an architectural marvel that highlights the role of dance in both religious and social spheres.

Renowned dance teachers and choreographers such as Sangeeta Ratnakara Sarangadeva and his successors influenced the development of dance during this period. Bharatanatyam, Yakshagana, and Kuchipudi gained prominence, with temple carvings at Lepakshi and Hampi preserving classical poses (karanas) as described in the Natya Shastra.

### Dance After the Vijayanagara Empire

The fall of the Vijayanagara Empire in 1565 after the Battle of Talikota led to significant socio-political changes that affected dance traditions. Many temple institutions lost royal patronage, and the Devadasi system faced gradual decline. While dance continued in some temple spaces, its influence diminished as Mughal and Deccan Sultanate influences grew, leading to the rise of more Persianized art forms like Kathak in North India.

Despite this decline, regional rulers such as the Nayakas of Madurai and Thanjavur sustained Bharatanatyam through court performances. Tanjore Quartet (Chinnayya, Ponnayya, Sivanandam, and Vadivelu) played a pivotal role in refining Bharatanatyam during the 18th and 19th centuries, standardizing its repertoire into Alarippu, Varnam, and Padams.

### Dance During the Mysore Dynasty: A Comparison with Vijayanagara

After the decline of the Vijayanagara Empire, many artists, musicians, and dancers sought refuge in the courts of local rulers, including the Mysore Wodeyars, who emerged as significant patrons of the arts. While Vijayanagara was known for its grand temple-centered dance culture, Mysore's contribution lay in the refinement and courtly presentation of Bharatanatyam and other dance forms.

The Vijayanagara period laid the foundation for the grandeur of temple-based dance traditions, whereas Mysore helped transition dance from temple rituals to a refined performance art. The Lepakshi temple stands as a reminder of Vijayanagara's contributions, whereas Mysore's royal court traditions ensured that Bharatanatyam endured into the modern era.

### Conclusion

The Vijayanagara Empire played a crucial role in the evolution of Indian dance, bridging the sacred and secular aspects of the art. While dance before this period was predominantly a temple ritual, Vijayanagara patronage transformed it into both a devotional and entertainment practice. The Lepakshi temple stands as a magnificent relic of this cultural flowering, its sculptures immortalizing the grace and grandeur of classical dance. Though dance traditions suffered setbacks after the fall of the empire, their legacy endured, ultimately shaping the modern classical dance forms we cherish today.

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