

# THE DANCING KRISHNA OF OOTHUKADU



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# THE DANCING KRISHNA OF OOTHUKADU

[ An account of the sthalapurana legends, the history,  
the sculpture and the architecture associated with the  
Sri Kalinganardhana Perumal Temple at Oothukadu,  
the dance - dramas that used to be staged there and the  
life and compositions of the famous Venkata Kavi.]

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T. E. RAMASWAMI, B.Com.,  
on behalf of the Renovation Committee,  
SRI KALINGA NARDHANA PERUMAL KOIL  
SRI KAILASANADHA SWAMI TEMPLE,  
OOTHUKADU via KUMBAKONAM,  
Tanjore Dist.  
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## P R E F A C E

THIS BROCHURE is being brought out on behalf of the Renovation Committee of Sri Kalinganardhana Perumal Temple and Sri Kailasanadha Swami Temple, Oothukadu. The late Sri S. V. Narayana Iyer, B.A., B.L., Advocate, was long pressing for the renovation of these temples. His tireless effort bore fruit only after his demise when the Renovation Committee was formed under the Presidentship of Sri Krishna Gana Thilakam Needamangalam Krishnamurthi Bhagavathar and Thirumuruga Kirupananda Variyar Swamigal. The work of renovation was inaugurated by His Excellency Sri K. K. Shah last year.

The suggestion to bring out this Pamphlet came from Sri N. Ramamurthi, B.E. (Hons) and Sri N. Gopalakrishnan who have followed it up by helping in its preparation at all stages. Many of the legends and traditional history were gathered by the efforts of Sri N. R. Ramanujam, B.A. (Correspondent of *The Hindu*) of Kumbakonam and from talks with Rao Sahib Subramanya Iyer of Tanjore. Sri N. Murugayya Alathondamar, former Trustee of the temple, offered his full co-operation and took keen interest in the matter. The *archaka*, Sri Santhana Bhattachariar, also assisted me to a large extent.

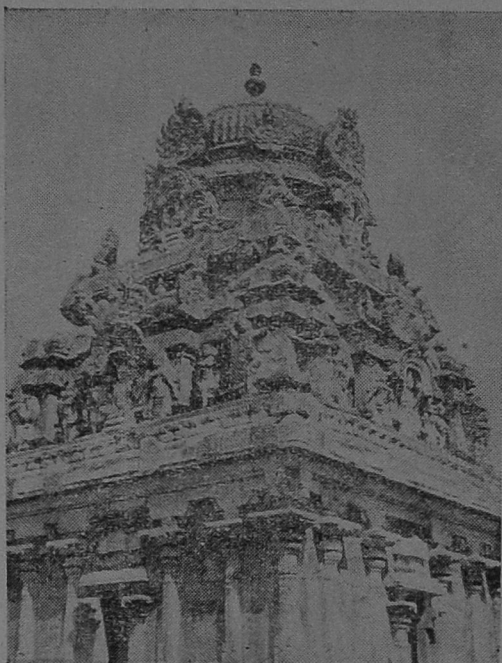
Sri M. R. Sampatkumaran, M.A., helped me in arranging the materials and drafting them into a connected narrative.

To all of them and to many others I offer my sincere thanks. We feel grateful to the advertisers who have helped us to publish this pamphlet.

Madras }  
18-7-'76 }

T. E. RAMASWAMI,  
Member, Tiruppani Committee.





Vimanam over Sanctum Sanctorum

*Onkaara Chitrayuta Kaalinganartana*  
*Mahaaranga Jaalavesha*  
*Sri Dhenusvaasapura Devaadideva*  
*Jaya Deva Namo Namo'stu te*

You who are associated with the wonderful pranava, who dance on the Kaliya-serpent as on a vast stage, who are the Lord of the Gods enshrined in Dhenusvaasapura (Oothukadu) — to You, O Lord, let there be prostration after prostration.

# The Dancing Krishna of Oothukadu

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HIDDEN in nooks and corners in obscure villages and hamlets, lie the precious treasures of our heritage. One never knows where one may encounter a miracle of art or inspired poetry. Oothukadu with a hundred and odd houses nestles on the northern bank of the Vettar, a branch of Kaveri, some eight miles due south of Kumbakonam in Thanjavur district of Tamil Nadu. A village completely dedicated to religious art, it has many claims to fame — through the sculptors who produced its amazing icon of Krishna dancing on the five hooded heads of the serpent Kaliya, the actors in its dance-dramas and the distinguished saint-composer, Mahakavi Venkatasubbier, who offered his devotion in mellifluous Tamil to the Lord caring not a whit for riches, recognition or renown.

## In the Sangham age:

In the distant past, perhaps even before the temple was built, Oothukadu found mention for other reasons in the poems of the Sangham age. According to tradition, Uppai, a poetess and sister of the celebrated poetess, Avvai, is said to have been born here. A generous patron, Rudrasarman, lived here. Nedunkilli, a Chola king of the 1st century, had a stronghold at Kovoov—a village of cows with which Oothukadu is identified. Kovoov Kizhar, to whom some poems in the *Puranaanuuru* are attributed, has sung about him and his rival for the throne. Nearby are three other places the names of which are associated

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with cows — Aavoor, Govindakudi (which may be a corruption of Go-vanda-kudi, the village visited by the Divine Cow) and Patteesvaram. Other names for the village include "Moochukkaadu" (the forest of breath) and "Dhenusvaasapuram" (the place where the cows sighed) and "Dakshina Gokulam".

### Krishna legends:

Legend explains these names. All are linked with Sri Krishna's feat in subduing the venomous monster, Kaliya.

Kaliya, as is well known from the *Puranas*, was a five-headed poisonous snake which challenged the celestial Garuda (the golden falcon on which Vishnu rides) at an island called Ramanaka in the sea. Defeated, Kaliya fled for safety to a deep pool in the river, Yamuna, near Brindaavana. Here he found refuge, as the sage Saubhari had made it a sanctuary for fish and out of bounds for Garuda. But Kaliya poisoned the waters and the air all around and made it a death-trap for all living creatures. Sri Krishna dived into his stronghold, and dancing to the accompaniment of celestial music, on the spread out hoods of the furious Kaliya, subdued him. Kaliya's life was spared at the entreaty of his wives, and he went back to his island home, released from the threat of Garuda by the impressions of Sri Krishna's dancing feet on his head.

### Sthala Purana :

The *Sthalapurana* associates the appearance of Krishna at Oothukadu with the nearby village of Aavoor where Lord Siva is known as Pasupatheeswarar. This Siva temple is said to have been built by King Dasaratha during a pilgrimage. Later on, Sage Vasishta came to this temple along with the celestial Kamadhenu (the wish-yielding cow of plenty which arose

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from the milky ocean when it was churned) and performed a *yajna* or sacrifice. Kamadhenu offered her milk daily for 'abhisheka' in this temple to Lord Siva and thus obtained relief from an earlier curse. When the time came for Kamadhenu to go back to her heavenly abode, she left her daughters, Nandini and Patti, to continue to offer milk to Siva. Thus, Nandini and Patti habitually grazed in the surrounding areas when occasionally Sage Narada used to come and tell them stories about Krishna.

One day Sage Narada while describing Krishna's adventure with the serpent Kaliya, mentioned that Krishna jumped into the poisoned river from the overhanging branch of a dead tree. The cows could not bear the shock on hearing this. Fearful of what might have happened to child Krishna and unable to hear about the tragedy further, they ran helter-skelter, hither and thither, in great anguish without further listening to Narada. Since they had closed their ears to Narada and had so much exhausted themselves in agonized crying that they were collapsing, Krishna decided to appear before them and remove their anxiety and save their lives. Thereupon, a spring started gushing forth nearby and formed a pond in which Krishna appeared, showing Himself to the cows, Nandini and Patti, in the form as He was while He was dancing triumphantly on the heads of Kaliya.

On seeing this form popularly known as that **Kaliyamardana or Kaliyanartaka**, the cows breathed a deep sigh of relief and recovered from their shock and terror. Hence the place derived its name "Oothukadu" from this incident (**Oothukadu**, i.e. the forest with a spring) — from the miraculous way in which water gushed forth from the dry ground to form the tank.



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"Moochukadu" (Moochu - kadu), which is also another name to this place, is derived from the fact that the cows heaved a deep sigh of relief. The corresponding Sanskrit word is "Dhenusvaasapuram".



Krishna appears before the cows

The tank came to be known as 'Kalinga Madu'. The word 'Kalinga' must be a corrupt form of 'Kalinda' or 'Kaliya', the former signifying the Yamuna and the latter the five-headed snake of that name. The temple was built adjacent to this tank. Narada is said to have originally consecrated the temple.

### The Temple:

Later, a temple housed the vision of the divine cows, as caught by the sculptor's art. A Chola monarch known as Nalankanda Chozhan, built

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ramparts around it. He is also said to have installed and consecrated the images of the consorts of Krishna,



A tablet of the Chozha King

in obedience to the instructions given by an aerial voice. A king, Azhahaadri Naaik, repaired the temple. The tower at the entrance of the temple is said to have a mystic association with Adi Sesha, the serpent couch of Lord Mahavishnu. In architectural design, the temple is different from that of other temples and has unique features, although the tower is not a tall one.

### The Marvellous Dancer :

Sri Krishna dancing on the heads of Kaliya, is represented in the metal icon taken out in processions (i.e. the **utsava moorti**). His two consorts stand by His side. The cows representing Nandini and Patti with their calves are on either side. Behind the festival icon are the stone idols (*moola vigrahas*) of Veda Naarayana and His consorts, all seated. It is the image of the dancing Krishna which is remarkable for its inspired art and masterly craftsmanship. Krishna is seen at the moment of his triumph after a ferocious fight with Kaliya, which churned up the waters in the tank and had thrown up mud. **Particles of mud which fell on Krishna's legs can be seen on the icon.** The four-foot icon shows Krishna with

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both legs bent in a dancing pose, the left foot barely touching the central hood of Kaliya and the right foot raised. The left hand grasps lightly and carelessly the tip of the five-foot long tail of the deadly serpent, while the right hand in the **abhaya mudra** (the gesture of protection) assures security to all. Krishna is as yet a boy and is nude, except for His crown and jewels, including necklaces, armlets, bangles, a girdle and anklets. The victory of Krishna is indicated by the human bust which is inscribed under the hoods of Kaliya as representing his semi-divine form, and which has joined its palms in supplication.

It may be relevant to mention that Siva in His dancing form of Nataraja, is usually represented with His **left leg** raised. Vishnu, in His dancing form of Krishna, is here represented with His **right leg** raised. This brings home the fact that the cosmic dances of Siva and Vishnu are complementary.

### **The Sculptural Masterpiece :**

The sculptural feat in the image is the mystery of its exquisite and perfect balance. **The left foot is not in contact with the hoods: a thread can be drawn in between from one side to the other.** The weight of the idol rests wholly on the tail of the serpent through the left hand holding it. The sculpture has thus immortalised a moment in the dance when both the feet were in the air. It is perhaps this remarkable feat that has given rise to the tradition that the idol was made by no human hands. It is said to be **vitanka**, not made by any sculptor's chisel, and hence **svayambhu**, self-created, having been found in the temple tank as a result of a divine miracle. The modern rationalist, if he so

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chooses, can speculate that a sculptor of genius made the icon, chose to remain anonymous in accordance



The Sculptural Masterpiece

with Indian tradition and that, after many vicissitudes, his masterpiece was found in the temple tank.

**A centre of religious art :**

Be this as it may, Oothukadu felt the full impact of the beauty and sanctity of the dancing Krishna. Through His grace, this village became a centre of

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religious art. Other similar centres developed nearby at Melattur, Soolamangalam and Saaliyamangalam. Even today, there is a saying that these four villages were famous for four *ragas*—"Saaliyamangalam for **Mukhaari** ; Melattur for **Mohanam** ; Soolamangalam for **Ataana** ; and Oothukadu for **Ahiri**." In all of them, once every year dance-dramas used to be staged by specially trained Brahmin dancers, passing on their art from generation to generation as priceless family heirlooms. (Records are available of the actors' parts being treated as property capable of being pledged.)

That the art of dance was once held in high reverence and practised by learned Brahmins in the heyday of the Sanskrit drama can be inferred, says Dr. V. Raghavan. At Kuchipudi in Andhra and in some villages in Tamil Nadu the tradition has survived almost to the present day. Old Chozha inscriptions also mention "Aariyakkoothu" which must have been a kind of dance-drama based on Sanskrit authorities on dance and drama. The Tanjore and Kuchipudi modes of acting and dancing have come to be known as "Bhaagavata-mela". And Dr. Raghavan declares that "in the Bhagavata-mela tradition the Sanskrit **Bharata Sastra** is authentically present."

### Dance Dramas :

At Oothukadu and neighbouring places were staged operatic versions of the stories of Prahlada, Maarkandeya, Harischandra, Ushaa, Rukmini Kalyaana, Kamsavada, Raadhaakrishna Vilasa, Golla Bhaama, Satyabhaama and Paarvathi Kalyaana. All these plays were originally written in Sanskrit and during the rule of Naik kings they were translated into Telugu, which became the language of music in South India. But, at least one play, Rukmaangada, is known to have been in Tamil.

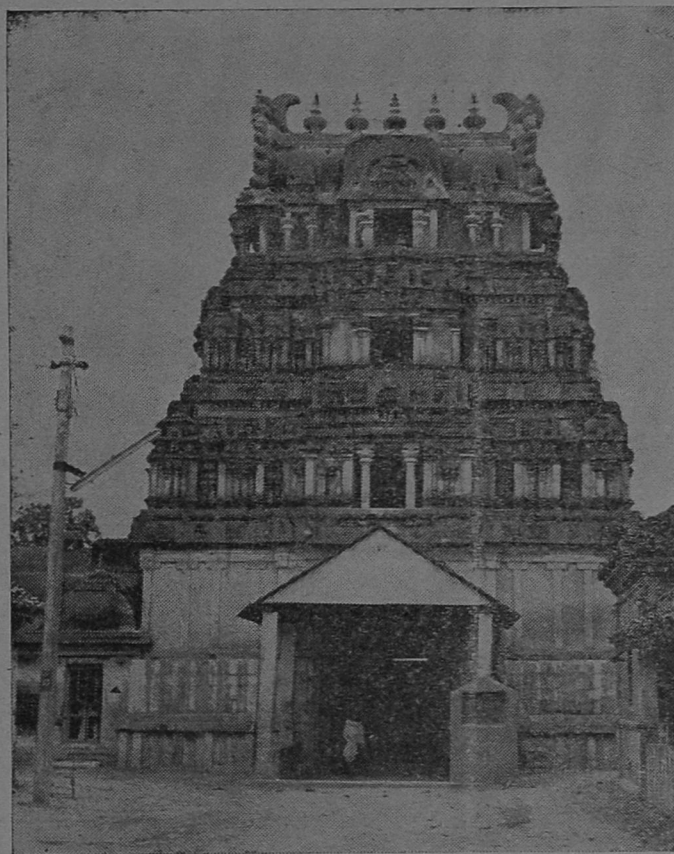
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Till thirty years ago, the plays used to be performed during the spring festival (Vasantotsava) in May-June, in front of the Kalinga Nardhana Perumal Temple. In the evening, the deity of the temple would be taken out in



The Entrance Tower (Adi Sesha Tower)

procession and brought back to the entrance tower. A temporary platform facing Him would form the stage. At about 9 in the night, the performance would begin, and it would conclude only at dawn, with the singing of Bhoopaala raga. The religious associations made the actors consider their work as holy service. Some of them

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would fast and keep themselves ritually pure to participate in the dramatic presentation. The actor playing the role of Narasimha would sometimes get into a state of divine rage or fervour, or get possessed.

The stage had no realistic settings, being only a bare platform. But some actors would put on masks, and most would wear costume suited to their roles according to convention and tradition. Dr. Raghavan says that "the introducing songs of these plays are very beautiful **raga**-creations; their slow movement and **Tala** setting are specially suited for **Abhinaya** interpretation and foot-work. The **Anandabhairavi**, **Devagandhari**, **Ahiri** and **Nadanamakriya** of these plays still haunt my memory. In content, the **Daru** (introducing song) gives us an idea of who enters and in what mood and circumstance. Every character, be it a child or a tottering old man, a king, queen or ascetic, has to enter dancing to the **Daru**. The whole action is in the form of songs, sung from behind and also by the character and rendered into **Abhinaya** by the character. Apart from the actors, there were a couple of singers, a drummer and a player on a small pipe called 'tutti'. In the place of the prompter, there was a reader of the text, a **granthika**, who would read prose passages linking song to song."

### **Sri Jayanthi :**

Another important festival is at the time of Sri Jayanthi, the birthday of Sri Krishna in the month of Avani (August-September). On the succeeding day, the deity would be taken out in procession for what is known as "Uriyadi". At many places, pieces of cloth or other prizes would be suspended aloft from a pole and tantalisingly brought down and lifted up, as competitors, defying jets of water directed at themselves, tried to seize them.

A movable platform (**chapparam**) with a canopy and with open space in the centre would be constructed. The

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deity would be surrounded by the platform on all sides, but would not be on it. The deity and the platform would be moved in the streets, creating the illusion that



Krishna with His consorts

the former was on the platform. Perhaps this arrangement has been made to save the icon from rough usage during processions.

### **Float festival :**

In the past during the float festival at Oothukadu, the Kaliya Nardhana episode used to be shown with the help of puppets. The Lord would be taken to the **mantapa** (now in ruins) at the centre of the tank. Experts in puppetry would get down into the tank neck-deep masking their heads with a hood showing a serpent with five heads. On it a doll representing Krishna would be made to dance (to the accompaniment of music from the banks) by skilful manipulation of wires and strings. A huge crowd would thus see a representation of the

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Kaliya dance. Unfortunately, this festival is no longer observed.

### A great composer :

Oothukadu's dancing Krishna inspired a great Saint composer and musician, Venkata Subbier (1700-1765), whose exquisite Tamil songs are only now beginning to get known. He composed and sang only to please the Lord, and it was through an accident that his songs were heard by the people during his life-time. Rudrapati (or Rudrapasupathi) Pillai, a great player on the **Naadasvara**, is said to have overheard the saintly composer singing in a lonely place and to have played the songs in his presence later on, thus provoking enquiry and leading to a revelation of its authorship. He thus brought Venkata Subbier to the notice of the world and some of his songs were saved for the world.

### Krishna teaches music :

According to family traditions, Venkata Subbier had the Lord for his preceptor. Failing in his efforts to

persuade his elder brother, who was a great musician and a *yogi*, to teach him the higher intricacies of music, he was in deep dejection. Learning the cause of his distress, his mother suggested that he should pray to the Lord for instruction. Going to the temple, he prayed aloud to the dancing Krishna. In



The Tulasi Plant

the fulness of his feeling, he ventured to touch the foot of the consecrated image. Suddenly he heard the divine anklets tinkling and a command from the Lord to await him near the **tulasi** plant in the north-east

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of the temple. Day after day, the boy learnt music under the guidance of the **Master Singer**. On another occasion, while he was singing with closed eyes, Krishna sat twice on his lap as a dirty baby and was pushed away. But he sat a third time, and when thrust away, He made the devoted disciple hear His anklets. When the closed eyes of the disciple opened, Krishna showed His resplendent beauty and vanished. New songs spontaneously came to the lips of Venkatasubbier. He is then said to have composed "Punal peru vellaththamizh", "Idhu oru thiramaamo" and the well known "Kayaamboo vannane nillum". No wonder that he should have become such a great composer. The icon of Krishna was often said to respond by moving when listening to Venkata Subbier's songs, as he sang all alone before the shrine. Stories are told of his curing with his song a chieftain suffering from an incorrigible stomach-ache, of his bringing rain with music and of other extraordinary feats. More important to us is the fact he has left behind devotional songs of the highest quality, which both the connoisseur and the common man can enjoy.

### **The Grace of the Lord:**

The Grace of the Conqueror of Kaliya has been felt not only by artists and composers, but also by ordinary devotees. Prayers are answered, and the grateful make offerings in thankfulness to this day. Those who err are firmly and withal gently corrected. An officiating priest who entered the shrine without having previously bathed, found a serpent twining round his feet. His plea for mercy, reinforced by a multitude who knew him to be really devout, resulted in the serpent moving away without biting him. It is said that there are fissures in the walls of the shrine which appear again and again, in spite of being closed with mortar, and from which snakes emerge and prowl around the shrine during nights.

Sri Kaliya Nardhana Perumal is particularly worshipped for fulfilment of certain wishes. Those

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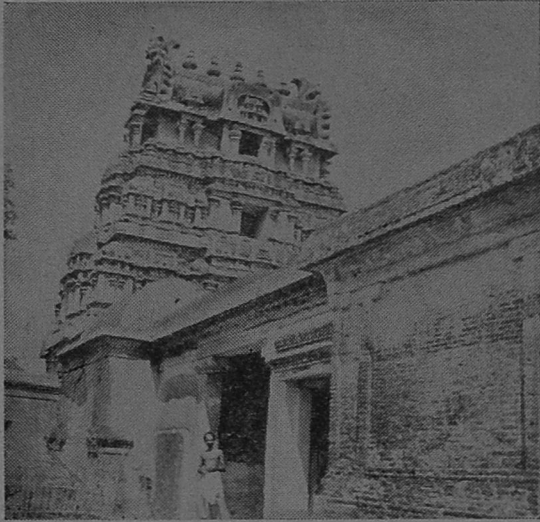
desiring children promise to offer cradles to the temple. Prayers from parents for the marriage of their daughters are quickly answered. Sufferers from the effects of poison get relief from bathing in the tank and worshipping at the



The Fullfiller of Prayers

temple. Students of music and dance pray to the Lord here for success in their studies and their careers. Inaugural dance or music performances are often held in front of the Lord's shrine. For success in cattle breeding and dairy farming, cows donated to the temple and

**abhishekams** with milk and curds are performed. Devotees also offer 'Chandanaabhisheka'—sandalwood paste to cover the icon fully.



An inner view of the temple.

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