



TARANGAM IN KUCHIPUDI: A CONFLUENCE OF DEVOTION, RHYTHM, AND TECHNIQUE WITH BRASS PLATE DANCING

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Abstract

Kuchipudi, a classical dance form from Andhra Pradesh, is known for its blend of expressive storytelling, intricate footwork, and devotional themes. One of its most distinctive features is Tarangam, where dancers perform rhythmic sequences while balancing on a brass plate. This tradition prowess but also a symbol of spiritual balance and artistic excellence. This paper explores the origins and evolution of Tarangam, tracing its roots to Narayana Teertha's Sri Krishna Leela Tarangini. It analyzes the Choreographic structure, rhythmic intricate, and theatrical significance of this performance segment. Additionally, it delves into the technical aspects of dancing on a brass plate, including balance control, foot coordination, and advanced movements such as spins, jumps, and glides. A crucial focus of this study is the manufacturing process of the brass plate, detailing its materials, construction techniques, and available size varieties. Traditionally crafted from pure brass or brass-copper alloys, these plates enhance the auditory impact of footwork while ensuring stability. Beyond its technical aspects and spiritual meaning, serving as a metaphor for the dancer's devotion and discipline. The study also examines Tarangam's transformation from a temple ritual to a celebrated stage performance, and its continued relevance in contemporary dance. By providing an in-depth exploration of this visually and rhythmically captivating element, this paper sheds light on Tarangam's enduring legacy in Kuchipudi.

Keywords: Kuchipudi, Tarangam, Sri Krishna Leela Tarangini, Narayana Teertha, Classical dance, Andhra Pradesh

Introduction

Dance, as an art form, has always been a medium of storytelling, spiritual expression, and technical mastery. Among India's classical dance forms, Kuchipudi stands out for its unique blend of rhythm, drama, and devotion. Unlike other classical styles that emphasize either pure movement (Nritha) or expressive storytelling (Natyā) or footwork and abhinaya (Nrithya),

Kuchipudi seamlessly integrates all the three, making it a dynamic and engaging performance tradition. One of the most visually striking and technically demanding aspects of Kuchipudi is Tarangam, a dance sequence where the performer balances on a brass plate while executing rhythmic footwork.

The origin of Tarangam can be traced to Narayana Teertha's Sri Krishna Leela Tarangini, a Sanskrit opera composed in the 17th century, which narrates the divine exploits of Lord Krishna. Over time, Tarangam evolved into a hallmark of Kuchipudi, showcasing a dancer's command over rhythm, balance, and coordination. The use of the brass plate in Tarangam not only enhances the auditory and visual appeal of the performance but also symbolizes the harmony between physical discipline and spiritual devotion.

This paper aims to explore the historical, technical, and aesthetic significance of Tarangam in Kuchipudi. It will examine the role of the brass plate in shaping the performance, the challenges and techniques involved in dancing on it, and the intricacies of its craftsmanship, including materials, sizes, and variations. Through this study, we seek to understand how Tarangam remains a living tradition, continuing to evolve while preserving its classical roots.

Historical and Philosophical Background

Origin of Kuchipudi and its Evolution

Kuchipudi originated as a dance performed by male Brahmin performers in temples as a form of worship before evolving into a theatrical performance. The name 'Kuchipudi' comes from the village of Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh where this dance-drama form was first developed. It is known for its expressive storytelling and vibrant movements. It integrates dance, music, and drama, often depicting themes from Hindu mythology and religious texts, making it a significant part of India's rich cultural heritage.

Kuchipudi traces its roots to the Natya Shastra and the Bhakti movement. It evolved from the Bhagavata Mela tradition, where dance and drama were intertwined to narrate stories of gods, particularly Lord Krishna. Siddhendra Yogi, a 14th-century saint, is credited with codifying Kuchipudi as a distinct dance-drama tradition.

Narayana Teertha and Krishna Leela Tarangini

Tarangam compositions originate from Krishna Leela Tarangini, a Sanskrit opera composed by Narayana Teertha (1650-1745 CE). Sri Narayana Teertha, ascetic and scholar, was born in Andhra Desa. Prior to his ascetic vow (Sanyasam), his name was Tallavajjhala Govinda sastry. The Krishna Leela Tarangini as a fascinating work that comprises songs describing incidents from the life of Sri Krishna. Based largely on Srimad Bhagavatam, it ends with the marriage of Krishna to Rukmini. This work narrates episodes from Krishna's life, and each section is called a *Tarangam* (meaning "wave"). These lyrical compositions are deeply rooted in Bhakti rasa (devotional sentiment) and are set in Carnatic ragas and talas.

Structural and Technical Aspects of Tarangam

Musical Structure of Tarangam

Each *Tarangam* follows a structured Carnatic music format, typically consisting of:

- Pallavi (opening verse)
- Anupallavi (secondary verse)
- Charanams (multiple stanzas elaborating the theme)

These compositions are set to lively ragas like Mohana, Kalyani, or Hamsadhwani and rhythmic cycles (*talas*) such as Adi Tala (8 beats) or Rupaka Tala (6 beats) or Misra chapu (7 beats), making them suitable for intricate footwork.

Nritta, Nritya and Natya Components in Tarangam

In a *Tarangam*, dancers seamlessly integrate:

- Nritta – abstract, fast and rhythmic aspect of the dance
- Nritya – expressive aspect of the dance
- Natya – play, typically a team performance

For instance, in “**Neelamegha Sareera**” the dancer alternates between narrating Krishna’s mischief and executing rhythmic sequences on the brass plate, maintaining both balance and expressiveness.

The rhythmic complexity of Tarangam

The Tarangam in Kuchipudi is not just a test of balance and agility but also a brilliant display of rhythmic mastery. The dancer must execute intricate jatis (rhythmic syllables), control speed variations, and maintain precise synchronization with the accompanying musical instruments like *nattuvangam* (cymbals) and *mridangam* (drum).

Intricate Jatis and Their Execution

Jatis, or rhythmic syllables, form the backbone of Tarangam's rhythmic structure. The dance performs footwork patterns that correspond to complex rhythmic sequences, such as ta-ka-dhi-mi, ta-ka-ta-ki-ta, and dhi-dhi-gi-na-tom. These syllables define the beats and structure of the composition, requiring the dancer to match their movements to the rhythmic recitation (*sollukattu*). The brass plate enhances these rhythms by amplifying the sound of each step, making the dance an auditory delight.

Each jati varies in complexity, ranging from simple four-beat cycles to intricate seven- or ten-beat cycles (*misra* and *sankirna*). The dancer must execute these with clarity and precision, ensuring that each beat is audible and visually striking.

Control Over Speed Variations (Laya)

The ability to shift between different tempos (*laya*) is crucial in Tarangam. The performance often begins in Vilambit Laya (slow tempo), allowing the dancer to establish balance and ease into the movement. As the performance progresses, the tempo shifts to Madhya Laya (medium speed) and ultimately reaches Drut Laya (fast tempo), where the dancer executes rapid spins (*bhramaris*) and sharp footwork patterns with extraordinary precision.

Transitioning between these speeds requires immense control, as even a slight imbalance can disrupt the performance. The dancer must regulate breath control, core strength, and focus to maintain fluidity despite increasing tempo demands.

Synchronization with Nattuvangam and Mridangam

A defining feature of Kuchipudi is its seamless synchronization between dance and music. The *nattuvanar* (the person playing cymbals) recites the rhythmic syllables (*sollukattu*), while the *mridangam* sets the percussive foundation. The dancer must align their steps with these beats, ensuring perfect coordination. Even in rapid sequences, the movements must complement the live percussion, creating a harmonious blend of sound and movement.

This intricate interplay of rhythm, speed, and synchronization makes Tarangam one of the most challenging yet captivating aspects of Kuchipudi. Mastering *Tarangam* requires years of rigorous training, as it demands physical endurance, rhythmic accuracy, and expressive storytelling simultaneously.

The Unique feature – Dancing on the Brass plate

Origins of the Brass plate tradition in Kuchipudi

The tradition of dancing on a Brass plate is believed to have originated as a symbol of devotion and stability. It may have evolved from:

- Temple rituals where dancers offered their art to the deity.
- Kalapams and Yakshganas, where dramatic storytelling required captivating visuals.

Technical Execution of Brass Plate Dancing

Stepping onto the Brass Plate

The dancer begins by carefully stepping onto the concave side of the brass plate. This placement is crucial, as the curved surface offers minimal stability. The feet must be positioned precisely to maintain balance while allowing for movement. The brass plate, being metallic, amplifies the rhythmic footwork, creating an auditory effect that enhances the dance's musicality.

Rhythmic Patterns with Toe and Heel Movements

Once positioned, the dancer executes complex rhythmic sequences using a combination of toe and heel movements. These movements correspond to intricate syllabic patterns (*jatis*), reinforcing the connection between dance and music. The plate shifts slightly with each step, adding an element of dynamism. The controlled movement ensures that the dancer remains in sync with the accompanying beats while maintaining grace and poise.

Bhramaris and Utplavanas

A defining feature of Tarangam is the inclusion of Bhramaris and Utplavanas. The dancer spins fluidly while maintaining balance on the plate, demonstrating immense coordination. Jumps add to the visual spectacle, requiring precise landings to avoid slipping. These elements symbolize the dancer's devotion and unwavering focus, making Tarangam one of Kuchipudi's most captivating performances.

Symbolism of Dancing on the Plate

The Tarangam in Kuchipudi is not just a display of physical dexterity; it carries profound symbolic and aesthetic significance. The act of dancing on a brass plate represents spiritual balance in devotion, highlighting the dancer's unwavering focus and dedication to their art and faith. It is often performed to compositions from *Krishna Leela Tarangini*, where the dancer embodies a devotee's deep connection with the divine. Balancing on the unstable surface of the brass plate is symbolic of life's challenges, where steadfastness and devotion help one remain steady amidst turmoil.

Beyond its spiritual meaning, Tarangam is a testament to technical mastery and mental focus. The dancer must exhibit extraordinary control over body movements while executing intricate footwork, Utplavanas, and Bhramaris on a curved metal surface. The ability to maintain rhythm and coordination while ensuring balance requires years of rigorous practice. This feat is further enhanced when dancers balance a pot (*kumbham*) or a set of lamps (*deepam*) on their head, emphasizing their heightened concentration and skill. The integration of rhythmic syllables (*jatis*) with precise footwork showcases the seamless blend of technique and artistic expression in Kuchipudi.

From an audience's perspective, the Tarangam is a visual spectacle that mesmerizes. The metallic resonance of the plate combined with the dancer's swift yet controlled movements creates an auditory and visual delight. The graceful transitions between steps, the smooth pirouettes, and the occasional dramatic leaps keep the viewers engaged. This unique performance element, exclusive to Kuchipudi, leaves an indelible impression on spectators, distinguishing it from other Indian classical dance forms. Through devotion, skill, and presentation, Tarangam remains one of the most captivating highlights of Kuchipudi, embodying its rich tradition and artistic brilliance.

Making of the Brass Plate and Sizes Available

Crafting the Brass Plate for Tarangam in Kuchipudi

The brass plate, used in Kuchipudi's iconic Tarangam performance is more than just a prop—it is a carefully crafted instrument that plays a vital role in the dance's visual and auditory impact. The process of making the brass plate involves selecting the right material, shaping it using traditional metalworking techniques, and refining it for optimal performance.

Material Selection: Brass or Brass-Copper Alloy

The plate is typically made of pure brass or a brass-copper alloy, chosen for its strength, durability, and resonance. Brass, an alloy of copper and zinc, is known for its sturdiness and resistance to corrosion, making it ideal for a dance prop that endures repeated impact. In some cases, a brass-copper blend is used to enhance both strength and tonal quality. The metal's density contributes to the rich, ringing sound produced when the dancer's feet strike the surface, adding a rhythmic dimension to the performance.

Hand-Hammering for Thickness and Resonance

Once the metal is selected, the plate is shaped using hand-hammering techniques. This method ensures uniform thickness, which is crucial for achieving balance and even weight distribution. The hammering process also influences the plate's acoustic properties, allowing it to produce a clear, resonant sound with every movement. Traditional artisans meticulously craft each plate,

ensuring that it provides the necessary grip and stability for the dancer while allowing fluid movement.

Polishing for Grip and Aesthetic Appeal

The final step in the process is polishing, which serves both practical and aesthetic purposes. A well-polished plate has a smooth yet slightly textured surface that provides the right amount of grip to prevent slipping. This is essential for the dancer's control during Bhramaris and Utplavanas. Additionally, polishing enhances the plate's visual appeal, giving it a golden sheen that reflects stage lights beautifully, adding to the grandeur of the performance.

Through expert craftsmanship, the brass plate becomes an essential part of Kuchipudi, ensuring both safety for the dancer and an enchanting experience for the audience.

Sizes and varieties of a Brass Plate

- Small (10-12 inches): Used by younger students.
- Medium (12-15 inches): Standard size for most performances.
- Large (15-18 inches): Preferred for advanced dancers or grand stage settings.

The plate's weight, curvature, and surface finish are crucial in ensuring proper balance and sound resonance during a performance. To check the suitable size the length of the feet shall fit into the inner circle of the base of the plate. You can also have an eye on how much it deflects when the entire body weight is on the plate.

Artist pays namaskaram with the plate, then keep the feet at the inner circle and slowly slides towards the raised edges both the feet together for a proper balance while sliding. Next the sharp edge of the plate is being hold between great toe and 2nd toe. All these are done within the stipulated time before starting the piece of dance.

Different movement with the plate: the general move is dragging the plate with both the feet together forward, backward and circular, with one feet at a time beating to the rhythm with the other side stationary, forward, backward or circular, Extrovert steps such as jumping from edge

to inner circle and back to the rhythm and or with swapping/crossing the feet. All these kinds of movements are done to perform one or more Jathis.

The speed of the movement is controlled by the artist based on his or her physical exert and the friction of the surfaces- the stage & the plate. The rough stages like cemented gives a better control of the movement due to its high friction compared to the polished and smooth surfaces such as a marble or wooden stage where the artist has to be extra cautious to the speed control and less exertion to be done.

Though the performance is contributed by the various factors apart from the practice, the foremost factor is the artist mental rhythm at the juncture of the performance.

Theatrical and Contemporary Relevance

Traditional Performance Contexts of Tarangam in Kuchipudi

The Tarangam in Kuchipudi has evolved through centuries, transitioning from a deeply ritualistic offering in temple courtyards to a celebrated performance in royal courts and public festivals. Despite these transformations, its spiritual essence and technical brilliance remain central to its presentation.

Temple Courtyards: A Ritualistic Offering

In its earliest form, Tarangam was performed in temple courtyards as part of religious ceremonies dedicated to Lord Krishna. Kuchipudi itself has strong devotional roots, influenced by the Bhakti movement, which emphasized surrender and love for the divine through art. The compositions of *Krishna Leela Tarangini* by Narayana Teertha provided the perfect lyrical foundation for these performances, narrating Krishna's divine plays (*leelas*).

Dancers, often belonging to the Bhagavata Mela tradition, performed Tarangam as an offering to the deity, symbolizing unwavering faith and spiritual equilibrium. The act of balancing on a brass plate was seen as a metaphor for maintaining steadiness in devotion amidst life's uncertainties. The performance, accompanied by live music and Sanskrit hymns, was a form of

storytelling through movement, with each gesture (*mudra*) and expression (*abhinaya*) adding to the narrative depth.

Royal Court Performances: Artistic Recognition

As Kuchipudi gained recognition, it moved beyond temple precincts and found its way into royal courts. The rulers of the Vijayanagara Empire and later the Nayaka kings of Andhra Pradesh became patrons of this art form. In this new context, Tarangam was no longer just a ritualistic act but also a spectacle of skill and entertainment. The precision required to balance on the brass plate while executing fast-paced rhythmic sequences made it a highlight of Kuchipudi presentations.

Royal patrons admired the combination of grace, devotion, and acrobatics, encouraging dancers to incorporate more elaborate movements, such as multiple spins (*bhramaris*) and intricate footwork (*nritta*). The grandeur of court settings allowed for the refinement and evolution of Kuchipudi's technique, with elaborate costumes, jewelry, and stage decor enhancing the performance.

Modern Adaptations of Tarangam in Kuchipudi

Over time, Tarangam has transcended its traditional temple and courtly settings to become a celebrated performance in contemporary dance festivals worldwide. While its essence remains rooted in devotion and technical mastery, dancers have embraced modern adaptations, incorporating innovative themes, technology, and global influences.

Tarangam as a Solo and Group Performance in Global Dance Festivals

Traditionally performed as a solo piece, Tarangam continues to be a staple in major dance festivals such as the Natyanjali Festival in Chidambaram, Konark Dance Festival, and the Kuchipudi Dance Festival in Andhra Pradesh. The iconic image of a dancer balancing on a brass plate while executing rhythmic footwork is instantly recognizable and draws audiences worldwide.

In modern productions, Tarangam is also adapted into group choreographies, where multiple dancers perform synchronized movements on separate brass plates. This adaptation enhances the visual grandeur, creating intricate rhythmic patterns that amplify the performance's energy. Some choreographers have even introduced coordinated formations, adding a dynamic, contemporary dimension to this traditional piece.

Experimentation with Contemporary Themes and Digital Stage Effects

While Tarangam's traditional compositions are based on *Krishna Leela Tarangini*, modern choreographers have started experimenting with new themes, expanding its storytelling potential.

Some dancers interpret Tarangam to depict broader spiritual concepts, such as the balance of nature, equilibrium of mind and body, or even feminine strength and empowerment.

Moreover, digital stage effects and lighting design are being integrated into performances. LED floor projections create illusions of waves, enhancing the concept of "Tarangam" (meaning waves). Interactive lighting responds to the dancer's movements, amplifying the rhythmic experience. In some cases, holographic imagery and background visuals have been used to complement the narrative, blending tradition with cutting-edge stagecraft.

International Performers and Global Appeal

The globalization of Indian classical dance has led to international dancers adopting and performing Tarangam. Dance schools across the United States, Europe, Russia, and Southeast Asia have incorporated this piece into their repertoires. Renowned international performers trained in Kuchipudi have presented Tarangam at prestigious venues, from the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C., to the Royal Opera House in London.

Workshops and collaborations between Indian and foreign artists have further popularized the tradition, demonstrating its universality beyond cultural boundaries. Tarangam, once a sacred offering, now stands as a symbol of global artistic excellence, merging the past with the present while inspiring future generations.

Role of Social Media and Technology in the Evolution of Tarangam

The advent of social media and digital technology has significantly transformed the way Tarangam is learned, performed, and shared. Platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook have expanded its reach beyond traditional performance spaces, while virtual training and creative adaptations have further enriched this unique Kuchipudi piece.

Increased Accessibility Through Social Media Platforms

Traditionally, Kuchipudi dancers learned Tarangam through in-person training from gurus, often requiring years of rigorous practice. However, with the rise of platforms like YouTube, Instagram Reels, and TikTok, Tarangam has become more accessible to wider audiences.

- YouTube tutorials and performances allow aspiring dancers from different parts of the world to watch, analyze, and practice Tarangam at their own pace.
- Instagram and Facebook live sessions enable experienced dancers and gurus to conduct real-time interactive demonstrations, explaining techniques, rhythm patterns, and balance control.
- Short-form video content on Instagram Reels and TikTok has introduced Tarangam to younger audiences, generating curiosity and engagement through visually stunning clips.

This digital exposure has also helped preserve and document rare variations of Tarangam, ensuring that future generations have access to diverse interpretations and styles.

Virtual Training and Online Learning for Brass Plate Balancing

Mastering the art of balancing on a brass plate requires consistent practice and correction, which was traditionally only possible through physical mentorship. However, modern virtual training programs have revolutionized this process.

- Many renowned Kuchipudi teachers now offer online workshops focused on Tarangam, guiding students through balancing techniques, foot placement, and rhythmic transitions.
- Slow-motion breakdown videos and zoom-based feedback sessions allow students to refine their posture and movements under expert supervision.

- Virtual reality (VR) and motion capture technology are being explored in some advanced training programs, helping dancers understand weight distribution and movement mechanics in a simulated environment.

These innovations have democratized learning, enabling dancers across the globe to acquire this challenging skill without geographical constraints. Through these digital innovations and creative integrations, Tarangam continues to evolve, ensuring its relevance in modern times while maintaining its rich traditional essence.

Conclusion

The *Tarangam* remains a cornerstone of Kuchipudi, blending rhythmic excellence, expressive storytelling, and devotional fervor. The use of the brass plate enhances the performance's theatrical appeal and technical rigor, making it one of the most iconic aspects of Kuchipudi dance. While rooted in tradition, *Tarangam* continues to evolve, ensuring its relevance in both classical and contemporary dance landscapes.

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