

Representation of Lāsya in Temple Architecture of Odisha: A Study with Reference to Alasākanyās

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Abstract:

This paper explores the expression of lāsya—the graceful and lyrical aspect of feminine movement—through the alasākanyā figures found in the Kalinga temples of Odisha (7th–13th century CE). Drawing on the Śilpa Prakāśa, an important medieval treatise on temple architecture, the study examines the artistic and geometric principles that shape the sixteen canonical alasākanyās. Through an embodied, practice-based approach, these sculptural forms are interpreted and recreated through Odissi dance postures, allowing their principles of balance, body alignment, and movement to be experienced in practice. The study reveals a close relationship between the sculptural language of temple art and the movement vocabulary of Odissi dance. By bringing together textual study, temple sculpture, and dance practice, it shows that the alasākanyās are not merely decorative figures but living expressions of movement, preserving a shared aesthetic tradition that continues to resonate through the dancer’s body.

1. Introduction

Odisha's temple architecture, particularly the Kalinga style that flourished between the 7th and 13th centuries CE, is renowned for its magnificent structures and exquisite sculptures. These temples are not merely sacred spaces; they are vibrant artistic expressions that reflect the cultural, spiritual, and philosophical life of their time. Through depictions of gods, celestial beings, animals, and human figures, the sculptors transformed stone into forms that appear full of life, movement, and emotion.

Among these sculptural forms, female figures hold a special significance, especially in temples influenced by Tantric and Śākta traditions, where the feminine principle is revered as the source of cosmic energy. Their presence enriches the temple not only aesthetically but also symbolically and spiritually.

This study focuses on the expression of lāsya, the delicate and graceful aspect of movement through the alasākanyā figures. Scholars such as Kapila Vatsyayan have explored the close relationship between sculpture, architecture, and dance, while Dhirendranath Patnaik has highlighted the sculptural qualities of Odissi dance. However, the alasākanyās have rarely been studied through the practical lens of dance. By combining textual study, sculptural analysis, and embodied reconstruction through Odissi, the present study seeks to explore how these sculpted forms continue to live through movement and performance.

2. The Śilpa Prakāśa: Textual Context And Significance

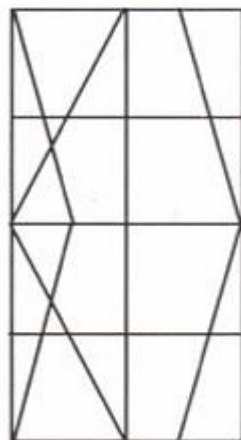
To understand the alasākanyā figures of Odishan temples, this study draws upon the Śilpa Prakāśa, one of the most important texts on Kalinga temple architecture. Written by the master architect Ramacandra Mahapatra Kaula Bhattaraka, the treatise offers valuable insights into the artistic, architectural, and symbolic principles that shaped temple design. It explains how geometric yantras were used to determine the proportions and placement of sculptural forms, including the sixteen alasākanyās. More importantly, the text presents these feminine figures not as mere decoration, but as symbols of beauty, vitality, and auspiciousness. The detailed descriptions of their tālas, bhaṅgas, and geometric alignments reveal principles that closely resonate with the posture, balance, and movement vocabulary of Odissi dance, creating a meaningful link between architecture, sculpture, and performance.

“As a house without a wife, as play without a woman, so without the figure of a woman the monument will be of no avail; it will be a house of ghosts.” (Śilpa Prakāśa, I.392-393)

This powerful statement underscores the central role of the feminine principle in temple design. It highlights the belief that beauty, vitality, and sacred energy are inseparable from the presence of the feminine form, making the alasākanyā an indispensable element of Kalinga temple architecture.

The 16 Alasakānyās: Canonical Archetypes into Living Bhangis

The Śilpa Prakāśa states that all the alasakanyās should be created according to a specific yantra i.e. Alasā yantra.



Alasā yantra

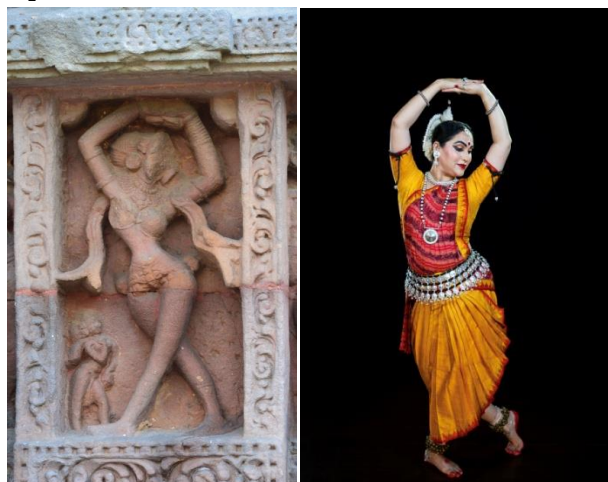
The above figure illustrates the geometric yantra prescribed in the Śilpa Prakāśa for the construction of an Alasā Kanyā. Its foundation is an upright, elongated rectangle, which serves as the essential framework from which the figure’s posture and movement emerge. A central vertical line establishes the main axis of balance, while a horizontal line divides the rectangle into upper and lower sections. On the left side, two diagonal lines extend from the end of the horizontal axis to the upper and lower borders, forming a triangular configuration. On the right, diagonals project from the central horizontal line toward the upper-right and lower-right corners, creating a sense of outward movement and dynamism. Together, these geometric elements create a balanced yet dynamic framework that guides the proportion, alignment, and expressive stance of the Alasā Kanyā (Śilpa Prakāśa, I.402-406).

Although invisible to the eye, a similar geometric framework comes into play when an Odissi dancer performs these sculptural poses. The placement of the feet, the alignment of the shoulders, the extension of the arms, the positioning of the torso, and the deflection of the hips all follow carefully coordinated spatial relationships anchored by the brahmasutra, the invisible, central vertical plumb line of gravity. The distinctive bhaṅgas of Odissi, especially the graceful shift of the pelvis and the corresponding curve of the upper body of abhaṅga and tribhaṅga, create dynamic lines that closely resemble those found in temple sculpture. In this way, the dancer's body becomes a living manifestation of the yantra, transforming geometric design into expressive movement.

In this section, the sixteen alasakanyās described in the Śilpa Prakāśa (Śilpa Prakāśa, I.407-477) are explored through the lenses of text, sculpture, and dance. Each figure is examined through its textual description, its representation in temple architecture, and its embodiment in Odissi dance. Particular attention is given to the dancer's experience of recreating these forms, including body alignment, torso placement, hip deflection, balance, and movement. By bringing together architectural evidence and performance practice, this section demonstrates how the sculpted figures of the temple continue to live and move through the dancer's body.

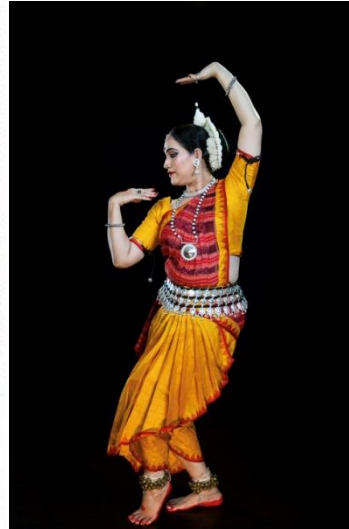
1. Alasā (The Graceful Maiden):

The Alasā is a graceful and elongated posture that creates a sense of effortless upward movement. In this pose, the hands are raised above the head while the head aligns with the upper portion of the geometric framework. The navel serves as the central point of balance, from which the left hip gently deflects outward, creating the characteristic curve of the body. The right leg should be beautifully kept, while the left leg extends diagonally. The posture is characterized by two variations of palm placement: Chanditā, in which the palms are turned upward, and Spanditā, in which the palms are turned downward.



2. Toraṇā (The Maiden Forming an Arch):

The Toraṇā posture is based on the same geometric framework as the Alasā, but the entire figure is oriented towards the right side. In this pose, one arm gracefully extends across the body to meet the other, creating a curved, arch-like shape reminiscent of a temple toraṇa (gateway). The body follows the lines of the geometric grid, maintaining balance and symmetry, while the final touch is provided by the Spanditā hand gesture, with the palm facing downward.



3. Mugdhā (The Innocent Maiden)

The Mugdhā embodies youthful innocence, simplicity, and natural charm. Adorned with ornaments, the figure is depicted in a graceful posture that combines delicacy with gentle movement. The right hand is held in a prominent Nāga (serpent-hood) mudrā before the face, creating an expressive upper-body frame. The left arm follows the inclined line of the geometric yantra and rests elegantly on the hip. Both legs remain flexed, lending softness and vitality to the figure, while the subtle bends of the body enhance its youthful and unassuming character.



4. Māninī (Resentful or Offended Maiden)

The Māninī represents a heroine filled with pride, self-respect, and gentle displeasure. Her head is turned to the left, expressing emotional distance and dignity. One hand lightly touches the lower lip, while the other is raised above the head, enhancing the feeling of self-assurance. The left leg remains straight and the right leg bends forward, creating a graceful yet dynamic stance. Adorned with ornaments, drapery, and beautifully arranged hair, she embodies elegance and

refinement. Her half-open eyes and subtle expression convey the delicate *lāsya* mood of love mingled with pride.



5. *Ḍālamālikā* (The Maiden with the Branch)

The *Ḍālamālikā* is depicted holding a flowering branch as though it were a garland, creating an image of effortless grace and elegance. Her body is arranged in a gentle profile, with one arm following the line of the branch while the other balances the composition. The subtle shift of the hips, the placement of the navel at the centre, and the contrasting positions of the legs create a harmonious sense of movement and stability. As she gestures towards the end of the branch, the figure appears relaxed, poised, and deeply connected with nature. The overall posture radiates balance, symmetry, and feminine charm.



6. *Padmagandhā* (The Maiden Smelling a Lotus)

The *Padmagandhā* is portrayed as a graceful maiden immersed in the fragrance of a freshly blossomed lotus. Gently turned to the left, her posture exudes serenity and timeless beauty. One hand lifts the lotus towards her face, while the other rests softly on the hip, creating an elegant balance in the body. The slight inclination of the legs and the natural fall of the hair over the

shoulder add a sense of softness and movement. Lost in the scent of the flower, she embodies refinement, delicacy, and inner grace.



7. Darpaṇā (The Maiden with a Mirror)

The Darpaṇā captures a quiet moment of self-adornment and reflection. Holding a mirror in her hand, she gazes downward with gentle concentration, as though admiring her own beauty. Her body is arranged in a harmonious composition, with graceful curves and balanced proportions. The elegant drapery around her hips and her poised stance enhance her charm and sophistication. She represents beauty, self-awareness, and the joy of adornment.



8. Vinyāśā (The Well-Groomed Maiden)

The Vinyāśā is a figure of elegance, composure, and inner contemplation. Turned slightly to the right, she stands with a calm and balanced posture. Her arms create graceful lines across the body, while her hands are arranged in japa-nyāsa, suggesting devotion and meditative focus. Adorned in beautiful garments and ornaments, she appears absorbed in quiet reflection. The overall form conveys serenity, discipline, and spiritual grace.



9. Ketakībharaṇā (The Maiden Adorned with Ketakī Blossoms)

The Ketakībharaṇā is depicted holding fragrant ketakī blossoms above her head, creating a striking and graceful silhouette. Her posture is marked by gentle curves and a sense of abundance, with the body balanced through the interplay of bent and extended limbs. The raised arm draws attention to the flower, a symbol of beauty and auspiciousness. Richly adorned and elegantly poised, she embodies feminine charm, prosperity, and vitality.



10. Mātṛmūrti (The Mother Figure)

The Mātṛmūrti embodies the warmth, tenderness, and protective nature of motherhood. Holding a child close to her body, she expresses a deep sense of care, affection, and emotional connection. Her posture is calm and balanced, reflecting both strength and gentleness. The

relaxed placement of the limbs and the natural stance enhance the feeling of serenity and maternal grace. More than a decorative figure, she symbolizes the sacred bond between mother and child and the nurturing force of feminine energy.



11. Cāmarā (The Maiden with a Flywhisk)

The Cāmarā is portrayed as a graceful celestial attendant devoted to the service of the divine. Holding a flywhisk resting gently upon her shoulder, she radiates calmness, dignity, and devotion. Her posture is relaxed yet elegant, with the arms arranged harmoniously to create a sense of balance and refinement. The flywhisk, traditionally associated with honouring deities, symbolizes reverence and selfless service. Through her poised presence, Cāmarā embodies the joy and fulfilment found in serving the divine.



12. Guṇthanā (The Veiled Maiden)

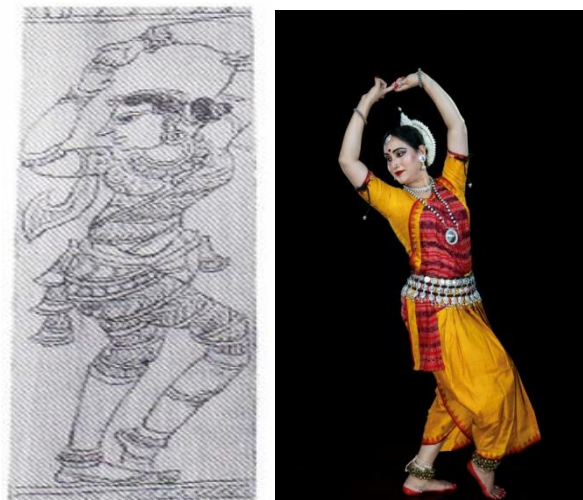
The Guṇthanā depicts a maiden partially concealed beneath a veil, evoking an air of modesty, mystery, and quiet beauty. With her head covered and one hand raised near the lips, she appears shy and introspective, as though gently withdrawing from the viewer's gaze. Her stance is firm and graceful, while the flowing lines of the body create a sense of elegance and restraint.

Sometimes shown holding drapery, flowers, or a fan, she represents the allure of the unseen and the power of inner beauty. More than a simple figure of modesty, Gunṭhanā embodies the sacred feminine principle, where beauty and wisdom reveal themselves through subtlety and concealment.



13. Nartakī (The Celestial Dancer)

With her body turned gracefully to the right and her arms raised above her head, she appears completely immersed in rhythm and movement. The dynamic arrangement of the legs and the subtle shift of the hips create a sense of flow and balance, as though the figure has been captured in the midst of a dance. Her posture radiates energy, elegance, and confidence, transforming stone into a living expression of movement. She stands as the very embodiment of dance and artistic expression.



14. Śukasārikā (The Maiden with a Bird)

The Śukasārikā portrays a charming maiden engaged in a playful interaction with a parrot or myna bird. Holding the bird delicately in her hand, she creates a scene filled with affection, companionship, and gentle beauty. The graceful positioning of her arms and the soft curves of her body lend the figure a natural sense of ease and movement. Her relationship with the bird

symbolizes harmony between humans and nature, while her serene expression reflects tenderness and joy. The sculpture captures a simple yet intimate moment, full of life and feminine grace.



15. Nūpurapādikā (The Maiden with Anklets)

The Nūpurapādikā is a graceful maiden associated with the beauty of movement and the musical charm of anklets. Her posture is elegant and balanced, with one hand delicately holding a flowerbud while the other draws attention to the anklets adorning her feet. The gentle bend of the leg and the flowing lines of the body create a sense of rhythm, as though she is about to step into dance. Through her poised stance and refined gestures, she celebrates the harmony between ornament, movement, and feminine grace.



16. Mardalā (The Maiden with the Drum)

The Mardalā represents a celestial musician immersed in the joy of rhythm. Holding and playing the mardala, she appears completely absorbed in the music she creates. The arrangement of her arms and body conveys movement and energy, while her balanced stance reflects control and artistry. Her expression and posture suggest a deep connection with the rhythmic pulse of the instrument, transforming the sculpture into a vibrant celebration of music. Through her dynamic

presence, she embodies the festive spirit, joy, and devotional energy that are integral to temple culture.



3. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the *alasakanyā* figures of Odishan temple architecture are not merely decorative sculptures but embodied expressions of *lasya*, preserving a sophisticated understanding of posture, balance, and movement. Through the lens of the *Śilpa Prakāśa* and the practical reconstruction of the sixteen *alasakanyās* in Odissi, it becomes evident that the geometric and aesthetic principles used by ancient sculptors closely correspond to those employed by dancers.

From a practical perspective, these sculptural forms serve as valuable guides for understanding body alignment, hip deflection, torso placement, and spatial balance. The study reveals that the *yantras* and *bhaṅgas* described in the architectural tradition function equally as principles of movement. Ultimately, the *alasakanyā* stands as a living link between sculpture and dance, demonstrating that the same aesthetic vision finds expression both in stone and in the moving body.

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