Chidambaram Tandava
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It all began 20 years ago in a sleepy little village, Khajuraho, with its complex of gorgeous temples and erotic sculptures. Here, at the 10th century capital of the Chandela Rajputs, the Madhya Pradesh Kala Parishad began staging an annual dance festival within the temple's precincts. After all, dance was once one of the important rituals (upachara) of Hindu temples until law put an end to the practice early this century in the name of social reform. (A Westernized elite persuaded lawmakers that dance in a temple was inappropriate, that the ritual artists, Devadasis, were harlots and that the custom of dedicating girls to this devotional life violated their free-will.)

The Khajuraho event became instantly popular and inspired Konrak and Chidambaram to stage like events. But unlike Konrak and Khajuraho, which are more art/archeological attractions, Chidambaram, the powerful Saivite temple of South India, cradles a beehive of profound worship inside its labyrinthian interiors. Celebrated in poetry and song for twenty centuries, it has attracted saints and mystics to adore Siva Nataraja, King of Dance, energizer of the universe. Sponsored by businessmen, state and central governments and the Sangeeet Kala Akademi, Chidambaram's Natyanjali attracts India's greatest dancers but has always been a delicate affair. It's inside the temple, but its not part of the worship ritual. Thus it helplessly attracts an entertainment atmosphere. The temple priesthood, the venerated 2,000 year-old clan of Dikshitars, like the event, but agonize over the hullabaloo of it all. Music blares from amplifiers, video screens image the dancer everywhere and electric lights reduce the gopuram to a cardboard cut out. This year a band of young priests attempted to ban the event claiming that women dancing in the temple is a sacrilege. But senior priests intervened and the event came off like every year-a leela of extraordinary talent, herd emotion and even some traces of devotion. Though quite thrilling, many wonder why temples do not simply reaccept dance back into temple upachara choreography where in its own sublime setting,

dance devotion, not theatrics, will uplift devotees.