

Classicism in Kuchipudi

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Aangikam Bhuvanam Yasya
Vachikam Sarva Vakmayam
Aaharyam Chandra Taradhi
Tam Namaha Satvikam Sivam

—*Abhinaya Darpanam*

1. Any dance or dance drama which is based on the principles of Bharatha's Natya-Sastra or any other treatise of that kind is definitely a classical dance. *Abhinaya Darpana*, *Hasta Lakshana Deepika*, *Sangeetha Ratnakara* are some of the other authoritative ancient treatises, though of much later origin.

Kuchipudi is a village in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh about 32 miles from Vijayawada. During the second century the capital of Satavahana's was Srikakulam which is 6 miles from Kuchipudi. Movva, the birth place of Kshetrayya, the great composer of Padams, is also very near Kuchipudi. We find that the vicinities of Kuchipudi are of great historical importance and cultural heritage for over 20 centuries. Like any other art form, dance was also existing in those areas under the patronage of rulers. Before it is given the name as Kuchipudi, the rulers were patronising 'Devadasi' dancers. There used to be 300 families of Devadasis in the Satavahana Empire according to the historical records.

In course of time, the Devadasi system has been subjected to feudalistic abuse. It is in the 14th century that Siddhendra Yogi undertook the task of reviving the style of dance, which is later came to be known as Kuchipudi style of dance. Siddhendra was the founder of the Bhama-cult. He believed

that Lord Krishna is the parama purusha and every devotee is a consort, in his divine sport. With this background of Madhura-Bhakthi, he composed Bhama - Kalapam a Yaksha-Gana which is being performed by the Kuchipudi School of Dance as its special feature even today. Siddhendra Yogi initiated only boys from Brahmin families to perform in his compositions. Thus the Kuchipudi style of dance has been confined only to men for over five hundred years and has been passed on from generation to generation as a family tradition. Even today, we find some families in Kuchipudi Village exclusively dedicated to dance. They were unable to spread and popularise this dance form in the country because of their tradition bound thinking and lack of enterprising abilities.

The Kuchipudi school of dance is based mostly on Bharata's Natya Sastra. I quote Prof. V. RAGHAVAN here, from his Foreword to 'Natya Sastram', a telugu book by Sri Ponangi Sri Rama Apparao:

2. "In Andhra, particularly the Bharata Sastra had been highly developed in the medieaval times, in the courts of the Kakatiyas, Reddis, Rayas and Nayudus of Warangal, Kondavidu, Vijayanagar and Racakonda. In the Kuchipudi tradition, the Bhagavatas of Andhra preserved a considerable amount of the knowledge of Bharata Sastra."

3. There is Nritta, Nritya, and Natya in the Kuchipudi style. There are six padabhedas mentioned in Natya-Sastra of Bharatha. All the steps in Kuchipudi dance-form are derived from this.

4. The first ever historical evidence on Kuchipudi dance is given to us from the Machiapalli Kaiphayat dated 1502 in which it is mentioned that some Kuchipudi dancers presented the ballet in the presence of Veeranarasimharayalu of Vijayanagaram. The ballet depicted the misdeeds and corrupt rule of one Sammeta Guravaraju, Siddavatam ruler. Another historical evidence shows us that Abul Hasan Kutabshah, Navab of Golconda (1672-1687) gave away the village Kuchipudi to the Natyacharyas in 1675.

5. The 67 Hasta Mudras, 13 Samyuta and 24 Asamyuta and 30 Nritta Hastas with the 108 Karanas, Charis, and Mandalas as mentioned in the Natya-Sastra are taught to the students of Kuchipudi.

In Bharatha's Natya-Sastra page 52 chapter 4, we find a verse depicting Karanas. There are atleast 108 Karanas mentioned by Bharatha Muni. The 20th Karana is very often used in Kuchipudi dance. Apart from the six padabhedas demonstrated earlier, Kuchipudi dancers also use some adugulu or adavus traditional to this school - they are: Chaukam, Katteranatu, Kuppi Adugu, Ontaduvu, Jaraduvu, Pakkanatu.

6. It takes at least 10 years for a student to master the delicate skills of expression and performance with all its intricacies and nuances. For instance, it requires a lot of training to ably perform Rangapravesam. Natya is the expression through bodily gestures and other Abhinayas, the sorrow and happiness found in the world.

Any form of dance can flourish only when it reflects the trends of the society. As such the lines drawn between various classical dances become very thin as time marches on. The Satvikabhinaya is taught with great care and delicacy in all forms of dance, whether it is Bharatanatyam or Kuchipudi,

Odissi or Manipuri. Kuchipudi Dance is generally woven around complete epic themes but now and then we find independent dance items like Padams and Javalis. A lay man may not discriminate between Bharatanatyam and Kuchipudi style of dance performed for a javali. But a close look however gives us the real differences.

While performing Kuchipudi dance the abhinaya is a gradual evolution. The dancer first expresses through the movement of her eyes and facial expression, then the expression is with a single hand gestures, gradually the second hand also joins and finally the whole body moves to abhinaya.

7. The great Balasaraswathi learnt Kuchipudi dance from Sri Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry. Her devotion to the art and her guru can be better expressed in her own words - "Sri Sastri's art and teaching opened my eyes to a new world of dance and beauty, of which I have been unaware till now."

8. The music used in the Kuchipudi style of dance is strictly classical and the lyrics are of great literary value. The letter writing scene in Bhama-Kalapam is considered to be a master piece from the point of view of music, dance and literature, depicting Vipralambha Srungara. The script of the letter is originally ascribed to Siddhendra Yogi.

9. After the fall of Vijayanagara Empire, some of the Kuchipudi artists migrated to Tanjavur. The Bhagavatamela of Melattur is considered to be an off shoot of Kuchipudi style of dance. Very much like the Kuchipudi, the Melattur Bhagavatars are generally Brahmin men, and their compositions are usually found in Telugu. These performers are called Bhagavatars because the purpose of their performance is worship of God.

10. As Alfred Tennyson rightly puts it: "The old order changeth yielding place to new, lest one good custom should corrupt the world." Any art has to adapt itself to the aesthetic sensibilities of the changing times. It is with this idea in view that Sri Vedantam Lakshmi Narayana Sastry initiated women also into Kuchipudi dance which was forbidden to women till then. The art has advanced to such an extent today that at times we see women playing even male roles. Andhra Pradesh has been a meeting place for both South Indian and North Indian styles of music. This is the place where the Astapadis of Jayadeva have become more popular than at any other place.

It is but natural that its impact lies on both the music and literature of this area. In Rukmini Kalyanam, the latest of the ballets choreographed by Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam, Sri S. V. Bhujangaraya Sarma has composed a song on the lines of Jayadeva's Astapadis. Sri Patrayani Sangeetha Rao, the inimitable music director of Kuchipudi Art Academy has set this song in Hamsanandi. This song depicts Krishna reciprocating his love for Rukmini, who by then is already pinning to join him. This song is in Sanskrit, as it ought to be and it takes us to the heights of ecstasy with its dance, to the depths of feeling with its literature, and to the limits of joy with its melliflous music.

In those days when men were taking female roles, Sri Vedantam Lakshminarayana

Sastry, guru of Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam devised a new item with his shrewed brain, to add glitter to the otherwise unattractive male dancer's female dance. He incorporated the plate dance, for which Oothukadu Venkata Subbayya's song Maragatha Mani Maya in Arabhi is now being used. This has become yet another special feature of Kuchipudi dance. This is generally preceded by a verse from Narayaneeyam.

I am sure that there is no dispute on the classical nature of the Kuchipudi dance now. But, there were days, when, because of some ignorant performers, an opinion gained momentum that Kuchipudi was a folk dance. Kuchipudi dance retains all the classical features expounded by Bharata's Natya Sastra. As time goes on, there may have been some changes, sometimes even drastic changes in this school of dance, yet they have never compromised with quality, never reconciled with low taste music or literature, and never abandoned tradition. I am fully confident that Kuchipudi was a classical dance, is and will be so, with eminent gurus like Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam shouldering the propagation of this sacred dance.

Kuchipudi dance has become a dance of international repute, thanks to the relentless efforts of dedicated, and disciplined personalities like Dr. Vempati Satyam. For dance, like music there are no geographical boundaries. All the linguistic and geographical barriers disappear at once, where only the art shines.

