

“Kuchipudi’s Footprints in History: Dance as a Catalyst for Social Good”

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ABSTRACT: All Indian classical dance forms since the ages have been developed not just as a mere mode of entertainment but to enlighten the people to make them walk on the right path. By following the trends of the society, the changing tastes of the audience, and the social and cultural conditions of the places on one hand and also strictly adhering to the rules of the Shastras as mentioned by the great sages on the other hand, these Classical dance forms had a lot of transition and transformation over the ages. All art genres, majorly the theatre and dance drama forms have the primary responsibility to take on the problems that society is facing and show ways to end that by enlightenment. This is the crux of all our Epics, mythologies, and Puranas. This paper throws light on the deeds of the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu to save the people from cruelty, as a social responsibility.

KEYWORDS: Bhagavathulu, Kuchipudi, Legacy, Social cause, Vijayanagara Empire

I. INTRODUCTION

Art, a combination of a diverse range of human activities, has a primary purpose of communicating and expressing the artist's feelings. But it is not just that. Art should also motivate and stimulate emotions and enlighten people to walk on the right path. Dance, the mother of all art forms (Curt Sachs, 1937), can communicate effectively and vigorously through all means. All art forms and most importantly the theatre forms have the primary responsibility to take on the problems that society is facing and to showcase ways to enlighten the public and boost their morale. The different narratives that would be performed by the artists in the dance dramas and theatre productions are always for the betterment of the lives of the people, be it philosophically, or spiritually. The mythological reason for the creation of Natya as mentioned in the 1st chapter (*Natyothpathi*) of the Natya Sastra of Bharata (Manmohan Ghosh, 1951) was for the betterment of the lives of the people and to teach them the path to act right (*Dharma*). The crux of all our Epics and Puranas is also the same.

Kuchipudi, one of the eight Indian Classical dance forms of India, that has its origins in the state of Andhra Pradesh, shares its name with the name of the village that it is believed to have originated from. Kuchipudi is a small hamlet in the Krishna District of Andhra Pradesh, 40 km away from the city of Vijayawada. Kuchipudi initially was performed by nomadic Brahmin men who danced the stories of Bhagavata Puranam, hence called “Bhagavathulu.” It was Siddendra Yogi, a 13th-century saint who taught his magnum opus the “Bhama Kalapam” to the young Brahmin boys of the Kuchipudi village and has taken an oath that they would practice and preach this for generations (Swapnasundari, 2005).

II. KUCHIPUDI BHAGAVATHULU

According to the dance scholars of Andhra, the dance art flourished due to three dance traditions in Andhra namely, the Kakaparru, Mainampati, and Kuchipudi. The community that had migrated from Tamil Nadu in the 11th century CE propagated the Kakaparru tradition in the coastal districts of Andhra which became extinct later. The Mainampati tradition that was prevalent in the Rayalaseema and the Nellore districts of the now Andhra Pradesh has also become extinct. The only surviving tradition that is still alive today is the Kuchipudi tradition which was started by the Brahmin men of that region and became world famous. Guru C.R. Acharyulu in his article “Andhra Natya Ounathyam” (Telugu) mentions that there are two types of dance traditions in the Andhra region, one being the dance drama tradition and the other being the solo tradition. He calls the dance drama tradition ‘Kuchipudi Bharata Natakam’ and the solo tradition ‘Kuchipudi Bharata Natyam.’ As late as the 1960’s Kuchipudi was still called the “KuchipudiBharatanatyam” which means the Bharatanatyam from Kuchipudi village. Guru C. R. Acharyulu also mentions the different Bhagavathulu from the Andhra region as Palagudem Bhagavathulu (name of the village), SriramavaramBhagavathulu (name of the village), Mylavaram Bhagavathulu (name of the village), Yanadi Bhagavathulu (fishermen and hunters), TummalapalliBhagavathulu (name of the village), JangamBhagavathulu (bards and minstrels), Dasari Bhagavathulu (nomadic groups), ToorpuBhagavathulu (eastern coastal style), ChenchuBhagavathulu (tribal) all in different presentations. Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu were all Vaidikis and their profession is to learn and teach the Vedas, participate in religious rituals, and be trained professional priests. In addition to that profession as it was instead of that in later years, kuchipudi Brahmin men, young and old, became the votaries at the altar of the village deities. Thus, performance has become a professional and familial obligation, much revered and practiced. Such family performances have become hereditary from one generation to the other, thereby making it a much-solicited profession for the expert and a wage-earning prospect for many others.

Amongst the various dramatic traditions that flourished in the Andhra region, the Yakshaganam attained more prominence. It is distinguished by its structure, musical features, and presentational format. This genre has influenced many group traditions which combined dance and drama in performance. The golden period for the Yakshaganam was during the rule of the Nayaka dynasty and more specifically during the reign of King Vijaya Raghava Nayaka (1633-1673 CE). Yakshaganam is a comprehensive form of art that contains various components like Kalapam, Prabandham, Kuravanji, Veedhi Natakam, Bommalata, Harikatha, Marga Natakam, etc., KuchipudiBhagavathulu performed many dance dramas based on the tenets of Yakshaganam. The Brahmin exponents of the art of Natya Mela shaped the form of Yakshaganam into a more stylized form confirming the tenets of Bharata’s Natya Sastra. Being adept in the Vedas and Shastras and peripatetic preachers of the art, they gave a new life to Yakshaganam performances.

Dr. Chinta Ramanatham, in his book “Kuchipudi Natya Visistatha” (Telugu) opines that Siddendra Yogi belongs to the Kuchipudi village of the Divi Taluk near the Krishna River and he has taught the Bhama Kalapam to his native people. Siddendra Yogitaught this Bhama Kalapam to the young boys of the Kuchipudi village and took an oath from them that they would continue this tradition forever. Bhama Kalapam has always been the crowning glory of the Kuchipudi pantheon. With just three characters of Satyabhama, Sri Krishna, and Madhavi/Madhava, this ‘Sringara Prabandham’ has swept the entire world with its presentational style, Angika and Vachika brilliance, and above all its deep philosophy of “Jeevatma striving to reach the Paramatma” concept.

This Kalapam which flourished during a century before the Vijayanagara Empire has become the traditional and authentic form of Kuchipudi dance drama. This form achieved its classical character too. There is no doubt that there must have been commerce between the classical solo exposition, temple dances, and its various exponents in a climate so healthy for the growth of the performing arts. The two streams of solo exposition and the dance drama forms developed reaching their high watermark in the time of the Vijayanagara Empire, the Augustan period in the history of Andhra. Sri Krishnadeva Raya (r. 1509-1529 CE) composed the famous “Amuktamalyada” in the Andhra Maha Vishnu Temple in Srikakulam village of Krishna district. History tells us that he has watched the *Kuchipudi* performances in Srikakulam and has used the word “bhrukumsa” (which

means a man donning a female role) in “Amuktamalyada.”

Kuchipudi, the traditional dance form from the state of Andhra Pradesh, was spread by the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu, the Kuchipudi dance drama tradition of Andhra had a deep influence from the Krishna cult. The first-ever documentation of the Kuchipudi Bhagavata performance was in the record named ‘Machupalli Kaifiyat’ that belonged to 1502 CE. Even in the records, the name of the troupe has been given as ‘Kuchipudi’ only and not any other terminology that has been going around according to some myths. The local records were collected on the instance of Surveyor General Mackenzie. According to the local records, a troupe of dance actors seems to have obtained an audience with Veera Narasimha Raya (r. 1505 - 1509 CE), the ruler of the Vijayanagara Empire. The Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu were on their way to the king's court when they came to know that one with the name Sammeta Guravaraju who was the local chieftain of a place named ‘Siddhavatam’ in the now Chittoor district of Andhra Pradesh, that was under the Vijayanagara empire tortured his people ruthlessly.

Sammeta Guravaraju used to torture his subjects for tax collection and in this process, he would make the women of the house suffer by plucking their breast nipples with iron hooks and pulling them onto the streets. Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu came to know about the barbaric punishments that the local chieftain was giving and decided to bring it to the notice of the King. As planned, they performed a Kelika in front of the King and in between smartly squeezed the episode of this suffering. One artist played the role of Sammeta Guravaraju, two as women, and one as a servant. Since Kelika gives enough scope for improvising the altogether unconnected story of Guravaraju, the format would have been flexible. Some other scholars suggest that perhaps the Bhagavathulu performed a Pagati vesham since an alien story could have been incorporated into it, for Pagati Vesham is open ended, non-text-based presentation. But, P.S.R. Appa Rao, a scholar of Natya Sastra and the dance traditions of Andhra Pradesh, opines that the Bhagavathulu must have performed the Bhama Kalapam. But this does not seem valid because, in a Sringara Prabandham, one cannot incorporate violence. But whatever the presentation be and the debate on that, the king understood the situation and ordered to behead Sammeta Guravaraju. Impressed by their art and their social responsibility, Veera Narasimha Raya donated some lands to them in the Rayalaseema area near present Cuddapah and Kurnool which were later wiped out by the families for personal reasons. This incident exemplifies how the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu utilized their art form not merely for entertainment but as a medium for social commentary and reform. By addressing societal issues through dance and drama, they played a pivotal role in advocating for justice and highlighting the transformative power of the performing arts in societal discourse.

III. CONCLUSION

Kuchipudi, as a classical dance tradition of India, has long transcended the boundaries of performance art to become a medium of cultural expression, spiritual communication, and social engagement. Its historical journey—from the temple precincts of Andhra Pradesh to global proscenium stages—reflects not only an artistic evolution but also a deep-rooted commitment to social consciousness. Through its narratives, characters, and emotive storytelling, Kuchipudi has persistently echoed the concerns of the common people, challenged social hierarchies, and upheld moral and ethical values.

As this paper has explored, Kuchipudi's integration of mythological themes with lived realities has enabled it to function as a powerful tool for dialogue, reform, and cultural continuity. The genre's inclusive nature is also evident in productions like *Golla Kalapam*, which speaks to its potential for voicing subaltern identities and critiquing systemic inequalities. Moreover, Kuchipudi's accessibility—through community performances, street plays, and educational outreach—has further strengthened its role in addressing social issues, from gender empowerment to ecological awareness. In the contemporary context, Kuchipudi continues to adapt and respond to the challenges of modern society.

When performed in rural settings, schools, community halls, or even on digital platforms, Kuchipudi becomes a medium of outreach. It connects people to their cultural heritage while also opening up conversations about pressing issues. Thus, the dancer is no longer just an artist but also a cultural ambassador, a storyteller, and a

catalyst for awareness and change. In essence, the journey of Kuchipudi is emblematic of the dynamic relationship between art and society. It reminds us that classical traditions, when understood deeply and applied thoughtfully, do not remain relics of the past. Instead, they evolve into instruments of dialogue, platforms for the voiceless, and sanctuaries of collective memory and aspiration.

It serves as a means of cultural preservation, youth engagement, and emotional healing, particularly when aligned with causes that seek to uplift marginalized communities. Dance, thus, becomes not only a reflection of societal values but also a force that can actively shape them. Ultimately, Kuchipudi stands as a testament to the enduring power of Indian classical arts to influence, inspire, and ignite change. As we move forward in an increasingly interconnected and complex world, revisiting and revitalizing such traditions with purpose and sensitivity can contribute meaningfully to collective well-being and cultural resilience. Kuchipudi's footprints, indeed, mark a path where beauty, devotion, and social good walk hand in hand. The footprints of Kuchipudi in history are not merely artistic—they are ethical, cultural, and deeply human. In walking that path, we carry forward a legacy where movement becomes message, and tradition becomes transformation.

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