

Transmission, Performance, and Identity in a Kuchipudi Dance Community in an American Suburb

Short Abstract

An exploration of the multi-layered and innovative strategies for teaching and enacting the technique, myth, poetry, storytelling, and rhythms of Kuchipudi classical dance in a multicultural American suburb. Using the techniques of field research, this paper will examine how the creativity and dynamism of the Kuchipudi dance drama form, which originated in 17th century Andhra Pradesh, has evolved in significant ways in its diverse and new setting, retaining its distinctiveness at the same time as it crosses cultural and gender barriers and identities.

Long Abstract

Sutradhar Institute of Dance & Related Arts, established in 1995, aims to bring the Indian classical dance traditions of Kuchipudi to students in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC through an exploration of Indian myth, epic, poetry, storytelling, and movement. Founded and guided by Nilimma Devi, Kuchipudi dancer, educator, and choreographer, the Institute currently brings together dancers from many backgrounds. Devi, born in pre-partition Pakistan, and of

Punjabi heritage, studied classical dance in New Delhi from an early age and, in her teens, discovered a passion for Kuchipudi dance in Andhra Pradesh.

Kuchipudi is a dance drama tradition that originated in seventeenth century male and caste- exclusive Andhra Pradesh. Currently, Sutradhar's practioners and students reflect an intergenerational array of cultural backgrounds regardless of caste, heritage, or language. Devi's personal and professional journey, expressed through her artistry and multi-layered identity, provides a pattern for this manifestation of Kuchipudi expressive performance, as she strives to nurture her students with a balanced tension of the structural core of Kuchipudi with individual artistic expression in a place vastly different from its original context.

Using the techniques of field research, interviews, and video documentation, this paper will examine how the creativity and dynamism of the Kuchipudi art form has evolved in Sutradhar artistry and expressive performance, retaining a distinctiveness at the same time as it crosses cultural and gender barriers, and is no longer experienced solely as the representation of a diasporic community.

As Janet O'Shea has written in her study of Bharata Natyam on the global stage, *Home in the World*, "historically, in India, the study of classical Indian dance often "inaugurated a dancer's professional life, making a young devadasi's entrance into ritual service and performance. The late twentieth-century arangetram, by contrast, signified amateur accomplishments, often terminating rather than launching a dancer's career, with student and teachers characterizing the arangetram as a "graduation" from a period of dance tutelage." (p. 154)

In the United States, Indian classical dance schools have prepared students for the arangetram as a "rite of passage that marks the adolescent girl into an Indian community, substantiating her Indianness before her geographically proximate group of friends and relatives." . . . The diasporic arangetram brings together an immediate South Asian community, symbolizes cultural continuity in the face of physical distance, and confirms a young woman's belonging to a community that shares an allegiance to the culture of a homeland."

Sutradhar

Nilimma Devi is a classical Indian dancer trained in the Kuchipudi idiom of dance. Kuchipudi is a solo dance form that developed originally as part of a dance drama format during the course of nearly 2000 years in South India. Today, as a dance teacher, dancer, choreographer, and dance scholar, Devi lives in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, DC where she directs the Sutradhar Institute of Dance and Related Arts. Her students are primarily

young girls, of Indian and non-Indian heritage—their ages range from 3 or 4 into their twenties. In the last few years, older students.

Expressive patterns of Devi's artistic creativity in experimenting with, adapting, and transmitting to a multi-ethnic community the classical expression of the Kuchipudi style of dance. Her conscious use of this traditional art form to interpret the poetry of the creative feminine spirit in innovative ways in an environment vastly different from that in which she was inspired to learn it.

Let me paint a descriptive picture of the Sutradhar School, whose main studio is in the basement of Nilimma's home. The dance studio is large with a wooden dance floor, mirrors across the back wall, clay figures of Indian deities can be seen in recessed windows around the room,

Etc.

Nilimma was born in pre-partition India in Peshawar of Punjabi background, which became the separate dominion of Pakistan in 1947. As a Hindu family, they were forced to return to Delhi—where she discovered dance.

Dance has framed Nilimma's life. As she told me, "going back to dance is like going back to miles and miles of my life, to the time I was a girl of 5. . . My aunt had gone to a finishing school and came back to Delhi enlightened by dance. She used to teach my sister and me a little bit, she would take film songs—our family had a gramophone, a hand-driven little machine and she would put one of the songs on and teach us . . . since those days, it has been a long, long journey, but from that moment, I would remember that "wherever the hands go, the eyes must go," something my aunt had learned, however small it was, of dance. And only later did I learn that it was an invocation of an ancient Vedic (?) text, the Natya Shastra, where they gave advice on how the eyes should be involved in your dance movement and then how your eyes should follow your hands and mind should follow eyes to create a complete involvement in the movement that you were trying to create." But, over the years, dance was a preoccupation that her extended family did not always approve of. As Nilimma tells it, "It was all fine until I turned 14 and then the pressure of not letting me dance was very clearly there." Her grandfather would leave the room, if the word "dance" came up. It was seen as something that women of loose character engaged in. Her uncle would ask, "What is she going to do with dance?" and "Why doesn't she try violin?" But, Devi's passion for dance did not abate—her determination only grew.

In the 1960s, Devi moved to Hyderabad in southern India with her husband and children, where she was drawn to study Kuchipudi, an Indian classical dance form that developed in that part of the country and was undergoing a revival. There, she had the opportunity to work with several excellent gurus.

But, even there, it was not always easy. She struggled to cross the barriers of language, speaking Hindi, Punjabi, and English, but not Telegu, the language of the Kuchipudi gurus. "As a north Indian coming to Andhra Pradesh to study Kuchipudi, it was painful to notice that masters of the tradition took my endeavors to pursue this art form less seriously, and often considered my efforts as merely a frivolous whim." This was also due to the fact that she was one of the first generation of women intituated into the art form—until this time, it had been the province of male Brahmin dancers.

Kuchipudi dance is characterized by rapid and complex rhythmic footwork, evocative facial expressions, fluid kinetic movement, and intricate hand gestures that often tell a story. AS Nilimma explains, "Kuchipudi evolved from a spiritual dance drama tradition into a solo dance form about sixty years ago in response to changes in society. For centuries, Kuchipudi had been performed by male Brahmins in a format that blended dialogue and dance to convey both a human and divine drama, in order to bring the word of God to people in rural areas."

Currently, " what distinguishes Kuchipudi as a dance form is its incorporation of theater into dance, weaving vivid dialogues with the stylized movement and gesture code that is familiar for dance." "It is speedier and more energetic than other forms of Indian classical dance . . . it is a living breathing language of movement; it has more fluid movements, theatrical expression, more obvious storytelling, curvilinear shapes with the arms and legs" and "and exciting sense of controlled abandon." It also invokes powerful feminine deities such as Saraswati, the goddess of knowledge and learning, and Ganga, the feminine goddess of water."

Program notes for Kuchipudi choreography she created to be performed with two African-American gospel songs in 2000—"I Want to be Ready," and "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot." Her program notes read, "Kuchipudi dance,once the exclusive province of male Brahmins and known for its fluidity and dramatic style, is just as suited for expressing the religious passion in gospel music as it is for telling the stories of Indian mythology."