



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Impersonation And Gender Discrimination In Kuchipudi Dance

Aathira A Varma

Assistant Professor

REVA University

ABSTRACT

Dance has a significant place in the religious and social lives of Indian people with Bharata Muni's Natyashastra as the source book for various forms of dance and drama. Dance forms like Manipuri, kathak, Sattriya, Bharatanatyam and Odissi have different style of costumes and ornaments for male and female versions. Mohiniyattam are usually performed by women. In kathakali and Kuchipudi women were not allowed to perform and all roles including women characters were depended on men known as 'Aswastha purushashrayam'. The practice of impersonation also known as 'Brukumru', is widely followed in Kathakali and Kuchipudi dance forms.

In Kuchipudi, impersonation is considered as a religious fulfilment towards Siddhendra yogi, who offered his devotional writings through a female voice. Thus, for the brahmins of Kuchipudi impersonation became a practice where dancer achieve religious vows, also the poet expresses his love to God with the female voice.

Kuchipudi is the name of a dance form named after the village from which it originated. Siddhendra yogi, a devotee of Lord Krishna and well versed in Natyashastra is the founder of Kuchipudi dance according to legends. He trained only the brahmin boys called 'Dwaja Kumaralu' and took a promise that they would pass it on to the next generations as well. They preserved the tradition by teaching the art to their descendants and performing the play every year. Later during 20th century Kuchipudi was transformed from regional performance tradition to a classical dance through the restless efforts of Padma Bhushan Guru Vempati Chinna Sathyam. He played important role in introducing Kuchipudi dance to non-Telugu speaking performers, women, and non-brahmin thus achieved global recognition for Kuchipudi dance.

Nowadays, the field of dance are mostly excelled by women, but in the Kuchipudi village of Andhra Pradesh women are prohibited from participating for public performance. The female roles in dance dramas like Satyabhama, Rukmini, Usha, Mohini are beautifully done by male dancers through female impersonation also called '*Roopa anuroopa*' or '*Sthree vēṣam*'. The female impersonation and typecast of roles are very common

practice in Kuchipudi form. Transformation of a male dancer to female character involves training feminine gaits, makeup, costumes, voice modulation etc.

In this present research the struggle of male dancer to achieve the female role and the struggle of women restricted from performance in Kuchipudi village is equally highlighted.

Keywords: *Classical Dance, Impersonation, Kuchipudi traditions, Sthree vēṣam, Gender equality, Renaissance, Gangamma jātara, Gender discrimination.*

Tradition & Customs of Kuchipudi Village

The depth of devotion in Dance and music forms are influenced by Bhakthi movement started between 7th and 12th centuries. Then in Kuchelapuram or Kuchipudi village dance was practiced and performed by devadasis and Rajanarthakis. By the end of 14th century Siddhendra yogi, who follows Vaishnava cult came to village and trained Bhāmākalāpam to brahmin boys. He made promise from them that they will perform dance drama once every year and would pass this tradition on to next generations. Thus, all men of brahmin families are trained by elder people to perform Satyabhama's *sthrree -vēṣam* at least once in their lives. Also, they learned Natyashastra, music and performed Trikala sandhya vandanam as prescribed by Siddhendra Yogi and are called Kuchipudi Bhagavatars.

This practice brought about a significant transformation in the lives of Brahmin families in Kuchipudi. It is believed that performing the role of Satyabhama is a blessing for the families involved. Some of the most renowned Bhagavathars known for their *stree-vesham* include Vempati Venkatanarayana, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Vedantam Raghavaiah, Vedantam Chalamaiiah, and Vedantam Pasupathibhotla. Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma gained widespread acclaim for his portrayal of Satyabhama and was honoured with the title "Abhinava Satyabhama."

Even today, the young Brahmin boys in the village undergo a structured training program, learning the *aangika* (body movements), *vaachika* (speech), and *aaharya* (costumes and makeup) necessary to perform the role of Satyabhama. Before beginning their training, these boys visit the Goddess Bala Tripurasundari temple with their guru, where ghunghroos (ankle bells) are tied to their feet. As part of their training to portray a female role, their noses and ears are pierced as a symbolic rite of passage.

Portraying the character of Satyabhama is not a lifelong role, even for the most accomplished performers. As the body changes with age, a dancer may no longer be suitable for female roles. At that stage, they are typically assigned to other characters such as the hero, anti-hero, or jester. These physical transformations that come with aging naturally shift the roles an artist can perform. When they can no longer take on prominent character roles, they begin to train their children or deserving students to take up the mantle of portraying female characters. They then transition into the role of mentors or advisers, overseeing performances and guiding the next generation, thus ensuring the continuation of the tradition.

In Kuchipudi village, the kinship-based cross-marriage system helped preserve the art form within the family. Fathers, sons, uncles, and sons-in-law were all dancers, and marriages outside the Agraharam were neither allowed nor encouraged. This practice ensured that the rituals and traditions of Kuchipudi were faithfully upheld across generations.

Cultural Renaissance of the Kuchipudi Tradition

Siddhendra Yogi, who lived between 1350 and 1450 A.D. in Kuchipudi village, played a pivotal role in shaping the dance-drama tradition. Prior to his influence, Jayadeva's *Geeta Govindam* was immensely popular, with audiences particularly drawn to the character of Radha. However, with the introduction of *Bhamakalapam*, Radha was gradually replaced by Satyabhama. According to my interpretation, Siddhendra Yogi chose to replace Radha with Satyabhama to emphasize the sanctity of a marital relationship over a romantic one. This is evident in *Bhamakalapam*, where he highlights the importance of marital symbols such as the *mukku mungura* (nose stud), *mangalyasutra* (sacred thread), and others, reflecting the dignity and devotion associated with the institution of marriage.

The Devadasis, who were traditionally skilled in performing nattuvamela, requested him to teach them Bhamakalapam. Since the songs of Bhamakalapam were already imbued with themes of sensual love, and the Devadasis were skilled in such expressions, Siddhendra feared that their performance of the dance would further degrade societal morals. To prevent this, he encouraged young, attractive Brahmin boys to learn Bhamakalapam instead.

The character of Satyabhama has long held a special place in Kuchipudi, earning admiration and recognition for performers. However, over time, the exaggerated expressions used by male dancers, combined with the audience's awareness that a man was portraying a female role, led to a decline in its appeal. This shift coincided with a growing interest among women to engage with Kuchipudi, sparked a new perspective on the inclusion of female performers in the tradition.

Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry played a pivotal role in reviving and transforming Kuchipudi into the classical dance form of Andhra Pradesh. He began training women and developed a solo performance structure inspired by the devadāsī tradition. Although often overlooked, it's evident that Kuchipudi Brahmins frequently interacted with and borrowed elements from devadāsī dancers to help elevate the form to classical status.

Lakshminarayana Sastry's contributions have left a lasting impact on contemporary Kuchipudi. Most solo dance pieces performed today are a direct result of his efforts to reframe the art form for female performers. His granddaughter, Akella Shanti Shastry, became the first woman from a traditional Kuchipudi family to publicly perform the art. Kuchipudi was taken for the first time to Bombay in April 1955 with a bunch of girls.

Among his notable disciples was Maranganti Kanchanamala, an educated, English-speaking woman, whom Sastry sent to represent Kuchipudi at the first All-India Dance Seminar, held from March 30 to April 7, 1958, at Vigyan Bhavan in New Delhi. The seminar aimed to showcase various Indian dance forms, with senior gurus mentoring young dancers. However, Kuchipudi was not recognized as a classical dance form during the event. Kanchanamala's performance slot was rescheduled to a less favorable time, and Bharatanatyam exponent Rukmini Arundale dismissed Kuchipudi as merely a subset of Bharatanatyam.

Despite such setbacks, persistent efforts led to the recognition of Kuchipudi as a classical dance form at the "Kuchipudi Nrithya Sadassu" held in 1959 by the Andhra Pradesh Sangeeta Nataka Akademi (APSNA). This recognition marked Kuchipudi's rise to classical status in the 20th century, a journey shaped by both the incorporation and the marginalization of the devadāsī legacy.

Gender Variance and Transformative Roles in *Bhamakalapam*

The Kuchipudi dance drama *Bhamakalapam* not only showcases the art of impersonation but also features gender-variant characters, most notably the role of Madhava/Madhavi/Sutradhara. This character occupies a unique space within the narrative, with no fixed gender identity assigned. The fluidity of this role allows for a layered performance that adapts to the context within the story.

Relevant to this discussion is the analysis of guising practices observed during the *Gangamma Jāṭara* in Tirupati and the *Chamayavilakku* festival in Kerala, both of which feature men dressing as women in honour of a regional goddess. The *Gangamma Jāṭara*, a week-long festival, centres on public acts of ritual cross-dressing. Male members of the Kaikala weaving community don the goddess's guise as part of their ritual duties, while lay male participants adopt the *stree-veṣam* to access or channel women's *shakti* (divine feminine power).

Similarly, the *Chamayavilakku* festival, held over 10–12 days in March, culminates in a night of collective devotion where men of all ages dress in women's attire and carry *chamayavilakku* lamps with five lit wicks as offerings to the goddess. Participants take part for various personal reasons, including the hope of receiving blessings, absolution from debt, or forgiveness for past transgressions.

During the performance, the character shifts identities based on perspective:

- As Sutradhara, the performer addresses the audience, guiding them through the narrative.
- As Madhavi, the character is perceived by Satyabhama.
- As Madhava, the character is seen through the eyes of Krishna.

This complex interplay becomes evident through the dialogues and interactions among the characters. The drama is deeply rooted in the philosophy of Madhura Bhakti, which symbolizes the spiritual union of the *Jeevatma* (individual soul, represented by Satyabhama) with the *Paramatma* (the Supreme Soul, Lord Krishna). This union is said to occur through an element of illusion or mysticism referred to as *Maya*. Thus, Madhavi/Madhava can be interpreted as a mystical, even imaginary, character, a symbolic presence that facilitates the divine convergence.

Traditionally, Kuchipudi was a male-dominated art form, with all roles, including female characters, performed by men. However, the role of Madhava/Madhavi stands out as requiring more than just gender portrayal it calls for a performer with the transformative capacity to shift between personas seamlessly, embodying both narrative and metaphysical transitions.

Padma Bhushan Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam brought a groundbreaking shift in Kuchipudi by reimagining its gender dynamics and performance conventions. In his adaptation of *Bhamakalapam*, he:

- Recast the roles of Satyabhama and Krishna to be performed by female dancers, a significant departure from tradition.
- Redefined the role of Madhavi as a gender-variant character, retaining a male performer to emphasize its transformative and symbolic nature.

As a devoted disciple of Lakshminarayana Sastry, Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam broadened the inclusivity of Kuchipudi training. He welcomed students across caste, gender, and linguistic backgrounds, including non-Telugu and non-Brahmin aspirants an unprecedented move at the time. By founding the Kuchipudi Art Academy, he created a platform where both men and women could receive formal training in the art form. His

efforts helped elevate Kuchipudi from a traditional temple dance to a globally recognized classical performance art. He choreographed numerous dance dramas and solo pieces, modernizing the presentation while preserving the spiritual and cultural essence of the form.

Dr. Vempati's legacy lies in his ability to adapt tradition for modern sensibilities, ensuring that Kuchipudi continues to captivate diverse audiences while staying true to its philosophical roots.

Behind Closed Doors: The Marginalization of Women in Kuchipudi Dance

When examining the legacy and changes introduced by Lakshmi Narayana Shastry and Chinna Sathyam in training both men and women, it becomes apparent that they restricted the women in their families from learning Kuchipudi. Despite their daughters' evident curiosity and desire to learn the basics of Kuchipudi, often practicing secretly in their homes, they were denied the opportunity to participate. This raises the question: was this decision driven by a fear of expulsion from the Kuchipudi tradition, leading them to exclude their own daughters from dancing?

While boys in the family were trained and given public performances, a group of talented women within the family were left behind, restricted from learning or performing publicly. Women in Kuchipudi village, particularly those from upper-caste Brahmin families, held a privileged position compared to women from lower castes or devadasi backgrounds. Yet, despite this privilege, Kuchipudi Brahmin men cited reasons such as menstruation and women's limited mobility in the public sphere to justify their exclusion from participating in dance. This exclusionary practice persists in the Kuchipudi village to this day, and no examples of Kuchipudi Brahmin women performing professionally in public exist in the contemporary period.

The kinship system of marriage within the Kuchipudi *agrahāram* (traditional Brahmin settlement) encouraged cross-cousin marriages, resulting in women forming multiple familial connections to the world of dance. These women often had husbands, fathers, fathers-in-law, uncles, and brothers who were professional dancers, teachers, or musicians. Despite these close ties to the art form, women were subjected to multiple layers of exclusion. As daughters and sisters of Kuchipudi Brahmin men, they were overtly barred from learning dance. In adulthood, as wives and mothers, they were not only prohibited from performing but were also discouraged from even attending dance performances.

This systemic exclusion is evident in the fact that there is no known example of a woman or girl from a hereditary Kuchipudi family performing professionally in public. Furthermore, in village productions of *Bhāmākalāpam*, the lead role of Satyabhama has never been given to a female dancer this character has always been portrayed by Brahmin men, reinforcing the restriction of performance to male bodies.

Several women were historically not permitted to give public performances, although they were exceptional teachers. Among them were Chavali Balatripurasundari, Baliakka the third daughter of renowned Kuchipudi guru Vempati Chinna Satyam Vedantam Rajyalakshmi, Vedantam Lakshminarasamma, and Vempati Swarajyalakshmi, the wife of Dr. Chinna Satyam. Despite recognizing Baliakka's dedication to teaching, Chinna Satyam never supported her to the extent he did his sons, who eventually took over the Kuchipudi Art Academy after his passing in 2012. A globally celebrated Kuchipudi guru who trained hundreds of women, Chinna Satyam did not extend that same opportunity to Baliakka and her sisters. Nevertheless, Baliakka persevered. Through a series of unexpected developments, the responsibility of carrying forward her father's legacy now rests with her a Kuchipudi Brahmin woman who, until very recently, was barred from performing dance. Rajyalakshmi's exclusion began early; as a young girl, she was denied the opportunity to learn Kuchipudi. Even after marriage, she was restricted from watching performances. Her husband, Vedantam Rattayya Sarma, was a celebrated performer known for roles such as Bali Chakravarti and Banasura. When he performed on the village's open-air stage, Rajyalakshmi would watch in secret, hiding behind a pillar to avoid being seen.

The silencing of Kuchipudi Brahmin women extends beyond performance. Academic and scholarly narratives, both within India and internationally, have largely ignored their experiences and contributions. This absence further marginalizes these women and erases their impact on the history and practice of Kuchipudi dance.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, I critically examine the tradition of suppressing upper-caste women's engagement with the arts particularly questioning the role of their male guardians. These guardians, while actively training women from outside their families and promoting the advancement of the art form, simultaneously restricted the artistic aspirations of equally talented women within their own households. This paradoxical practice not only highlights a deep-seated gender bias but also exposes how such discriminatory traditions continue to persist, even today.

Women like Baliakka and her sisters, despite their expertise and dedication, were denied the same opportunities afforded to their male counterparts. Their contributions were often overlooked, and their access to performance spaces and decision-making roles was limited. This marginalization highlights the broader patterns of gender discrimination within Classical dance traditions in India, where patriarchal values have historically dictated who gets to represent and preserve cultural legacies.

Yet, the perseverance of these women and the eventual recognition of their roles marks a turning point. Their stories underscore the importance of acknowledging and dismantling gender biases in the arts. The future of Kuchipudi lies not just in preserving its rich heritage, but in making it inclusive, ensuring that talent and devotion to the art are recognized, regardless of gender.

References

- Devi, D. P. (2013). *Comparative study of Chaturvidha abhinayas between Kathakali and Kuchipudi Yakshagana*. Kochi: Patinjarayil Publications.
- Kamath, H. M. (2019). *Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance*. Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Kothari, S. a. (2001). *Kuchipudi: Indian Classical Dance Art*. New Delhi: Abhinav Publications.
- Putcha, R. S. (2013). Between History and Historiography: The Origins of Classical Kuchipudi Dance. *Congress on Research in Dance*, 91-110.
- Roy, I. (2024, November Thursday). *Times Now News*. Retrieved from Times Now: <https://www.timesnownews.com/spiritual/men-dress-up-like-women-to-perform-rituals-in-these-cultures-article-115305931>
- Seth, R. (January –June 2014). Development of Kuchipudi Dance in the Context of 20th Century Dance Renaissance in India. *Social Research Foundation*, pp. 62-74.
- Soneji, D. (2008). Memory and the Recovery of Identity: Living Histories and the Kalavantulu of Coastal Andhra Pradesh . In Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Daves Soneji, *In Performing Pasts: Reinventing the Arts in Modern South India* (pp. 283–312.).

<https://www.auchitya.com/bhamakalpam-dance-drama-based-on-kuchipudi/> By Mahima Singh