

**RENAISSANCE OF KUCHIPUDI: THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF THE SOLO DANCE TRADITION****\*Dr. P. Rama Devi**

Sri Sai Nataraja Academy of Kuchipudi Dance, India

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**Abstract**

Kuchipudi, one of India's most vibrant dance traditions, has undergone a remarkable transformation from a community-based nāṭya tradition performed by itinerant troupes to a refined solo nṛtya repertoire celebrated on global stages today. This shift, shaped by socio-religious movements, migration, modern institutions, and visionary gurus, reflects the adaptability and resilience of the Kuchipudi *Bhāgavatulu*. This article examines the historical background of the *Nāṭyameḷam* tradition, the cultural currents that shaped its evolution, and most importantly the emergence of the solo Kuchipudi repertoire in the 20th century. Highlighting the seminal contributions of masters such as Chinta Venkataramayya, Vedantam Raghavayya, Vempati Peda Satyam, Pasumarthy Krishnamurthy, Vedantam Lakshmi Narayana Sastry and later Vempati Chinna Satyam, the article traces how Kuchipudi entered cinema, migrated to Chennai, expanded beyond hereditary families, and gained recognition as a classical dance by the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi. Through this lens, the renaissance of Kuchipudi is understood as a shift from collective dramatic performance to an individualized artistic expression aligned with modern cultural expectations.

**Keywords:** Nāṭyameḷam, Naṭṭuvameḷam Śṛṅgāṭakam, Bahurūpulu, Bhṛukūmsulu, Bahunāṭaka, Bahurūpulu, Śivalilā Nāṭyam, Vīdhi Nāṭakam, Kalāpam, Yakṣhagānam, Jakkiṇi.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Indian dance traditions have historically evolved through a dynamic interplay of religion, performance, and social change. In Andhra Pradesh, two dominant performance pathways emerged: *Nāṭyameḷam*, the traditional dance-drama troupes, and *Naṭṭuvameḷam* (also called *cinna-mēḷam*), a more music-dance centric format (Ramakrishna, 1968). The *Nāṭyameḷam* troupes, comprised exclusively of men, presented mythological stories rooted in the Bhakti movement epics, Purāṇas, and narratives of divine miracles primarily as a medium of religious instruction and entertainment for the masses. Because their themes centred on gods, these performers came to be known as *Bhāgavatulu*, and their tradition as *Bhāgavatam*. As Vṛttis of Vaishnavism rose in the medieval period through the influence of *Gīta-Govinda*, *Haridāsas*, and saint-poets such as *Lelaśuka*, *Narahariteertha* the *Bhāgavatulu* incorporated devotional compositions, Sloka-s, and lyrical poetry into their repertoire (Vissa Apparao, n.d.). Over time, they demonstrated exceptional flexibility, adapting to changing social tastes and diversifying their theatrical output into *Kēlikās*, *Vēśakathās*, *Vīdhi-Nāṭakam*, *PagaṭiVeśās*, *Kalāpams*, and *Yakṣhagānas* (Baby Rao, 1999). This adaptability would ultimately enable the tradition to survive colonial transitions, urbanization, and modern aesthetics leading toward its renaissance as a solo dance form. For centuries, Kuchipudi artistes travelled extensively, carrying provisions and costumes in bullock carts, performing at royal courts, temples, and village squares. Social constraints prevented women from joining these troupes, leading men to perfect the art of impersonation (*Strī-veśa*), earning them the title *Bhrukūmsulu*. Their survival depended on versatility like enacting multiple characters, adjusting to audience preferences, and incorporating new themes and musical structures (Unni, 2014). This performed adaptability laid the foundation for the later emergence of a solo repertoire.

**The Decline of Devadasi Tradition and Need for Structural Reform**

The recession of the Devadasi tradition, which had once nurtured refined dance in temples, led to a perceptible drop in performance quality, already lamented by Damodara Gupta in *Kuttanimata* centuries earlier. This decline, motivated scholars, gurus, and performers to seek newer modes of sustaining classical dance traditions including Kuchipudi (Kothari & Pasricha, 2001).

**Emergence of Kalapa and Yakṣhagāna Traditions**

The *Yakṣhagāna* tradition present in texts like *Pārijātāpaharaṇam*, *Kṛīḍābhirāmaṁ*, and *Manucaritra* became a major influence on Kuchipudi dramaturgy. Women from tribal or folk communities originally sang and performed these narratives; later, aristocrats expanded and formalized them into classical formats (Vissa Apparao, n.d.). Over generations, *Vesakathas*, *Kalapas*, *Vīdhināṭaka* and *Yakṣhagāna* merged into robust dance-theatre traditions performed by the *Bhāgavatulu* (Baby Rao, 1999).

**Birth of the Solo Kuchipudi Tradition:** The transition from *nāṭya* (drama) to *nṛtya* (solo dance) is the most significant transformation in Kuchipudi's modern history. This evolution was neither sudden nor accidental it was shaped by visionary artists, new urban cultural demands, and the emergence of cinema. Chinta Venkataramayya, was the Pioneer of Solo Sequences. Chinta Venkataramayya (1860–1949), an innovative guru and aesthete, was the first to conceptualize and choreograph solo pieces within the Kuchipudi dramatic framework. He introduced *Nāṭya-pallavis*, *Jati-vidhānams*, *Kīrtanas*, *Aṣṭapadis*, *Tillānās*, and especially the *Bālaōpāla Tarangam* performed on the brass plate a format he taught to VedantamRaghavayya, who debuted it in Madras in 1930 and he performed it for the first time in Madras along with *DasavataraSabdham* (Sundari, 2005). This marked the official

public beginning of the solo Kuchipudi tradition. *Vempati Paradesi* (1880-1940) and *Bhagavatula Vissayya* (1880 – 1959) began to teach solo items to certain artists from other communities. 1940 under the banner of “*Prabhakara Natya Maṇḍali*”, *Vedantam Raghavayya*, *Pasumarthy Krishna Murthy* and *Vempati Pedda Satyam* toured the country for almost one year to propagate Kūcipūḍi dance tradition. From the 1930s onward, Kuchipudi masters moved to the cultural hub of Madras (now Chennai) then the centre of South Indian cinema and classical arts. This migration catalysed the transformation of Kuchipudi. *Vedantam Raghavayya*, a brilliant dancer and later a celebrated film choreographer and director, brought Kuchipudi aesthetics to cinema, seamlessly merging theatrical *abhinaya* with film’s visual medium. His choreography in Telugu and Tamil films popularized Kuchipudi’s graceful lines, expressive vocabulary, and *Tarangam* technique. *Vempati Peda Satyam* (1880–1940) trained several early film dancers and adapted Kuchipudi items for cinematic expression, making the form more accessible to mainstream audiences. *Pasumarthy Krishnamurthy* contributed significantly by composing, choreographing, and training dancers in modified solo formats suited to proscenium stages and studio settings. Their synchronized artistic efforts brought Kuchipudi not only into urban *sabhas* but also into popular consciousness through cinema something no classical form had previously achieved at this scale (Raghavan, 2004; Narayan, 2005). This cinematic visibility helped construct the “solo dancer” image of Kuchipudi, setting it apart from its mela origins.

### **Institutional Recognition: Kuchipudi as a Classical Dance - The 1958–1959 Sangeet Natak Akademi Seminars**

A pivotal milestone in Kuchipudi’s modern history was the national recognition of the form as a classical dance. Initially, in 1958, the SNA listed Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Manipuri, and Kathakali as classical forms Kuchipudi was excluded, triggering widespread concern among practitioners. Consequently, the Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi organized a historic seminar in February–March 1959, led by Nataraja Ramakrishna. Gurus, scholars, and performers collectively presented historical evidence tracing Kuchipudi to ancient nāṭya traditions, technical demonstrations of Karaṇas, aḍavu, and abhinaya, comparative analyses with treatises such as *Nāṭyaśāstra* and *Abhinaya Darpanam* (Unni, 2014). Scholars such as Vissa Apparao, Ramakrishnaraju, Lanka Suryanarayana Shastry, and eminent performers like Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, VedantamRaghavayya, Chinta Krishnamurthy demonstrated both male impersonation and solo repertoire. This seminar placed a major responsibility on gurus, practitioners, and scholars to come together to present the historical, technical, and aesthetic foundations of Kuchipudi and advocate for its recognition. During the seminar, several scholars presented papers on the history, antecedents, and techniques of Kuchipudi. Notable contributors included Vissa Apparao, M. Ramarao, AyyankiTāndava Krishna, C. R. Ramakrishnaraju, C.V.V.R. Prasad, C.R. Acharyulu, Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, A. Venkata Ramanayya, Lanka Suryanarayana Sastry, Nataraja Ramakrishna, and Bhagavatula Ramakotayya. The Akademi’s brief report also listed specific Kuchipudi items and demonstrations performed for scholars and officials. 29th February (Evening) Dance-dramas: *Bhāma Kalāpam*, *Bhakta Prahlada*, *Golla Kalāpam* (performed by Chinta Krishna Murthy’s troupe), Lecture-demonstrations on training methods

for *aṅgas* and *upāṅgas* (body techniques) by the Chinta Krishna Murthy party, Talk-demonstrations on the four types of abhinaya as described in the Nāṭyaśāstra and their expression in Kuchipudi, presented by P. V. Subrahmanya Sastry, Presentation of *Pindotpathi Krama* from the *Devadāsīs’ Golla Kalāpam*, including *Amba Prarthana*, *Pushpanjali*, and *Ganapati Vandana*, followed by a creation-cosmology exposition in Sanskrit and Telugu, performed by *Devadāsīs* Smt. Vaidehi and Smt. Induvandana. On 1st March (Second Day): Full-length dance-drama: *Usha Parinayam*, with the lead female role performed by Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, which was filmed and recorded for the Akademi. Additional demonstrations and performances by Chinta Krishna Murthy and his troupe, the Chittajallu sisters Induvandana and Vaidehi, as well as Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma and VedantamRaghavayya, showcasing both the technical and performative aspects of Kuchipudi. Through these scholarly presentations and live demonstrations, the seminar successfully demonstrated the historical depth, technical rigor, and aesthetic sophistication of Kuchipudi. As a result, the Sangeet Natak Akademi formally recognized Kuchipudi as one of India’s classical dance traditions, securing its place in the pantheon of Indian classical arts.

### **Consolidation of the Solo Repertoire**

Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry is the one who systematized the Solo tradition of Kuchipudi. Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry (1880–1940) played an unparalleled role in refining and structuring solo Kuchipudi dance. He choreographed a range of *Aṣṭapadis*, *Padams*, *Jāvalis*, *Ślokams*, *Pushpabāṇa-vilāpam*, and other *abhinaya*-rich compositions. He introduced intricate *jāti* patterns, *Sollukaṭṭus*, and developed the *tarangam* technique to high sophistication. He also trained his students standing on the edges of the brass plate filled with water and balancing a pot filled with water on the head without spilling a single drop of water. He trained his disciples with individual care and attempted to bring out the deepest talents in them, some of his talented disciples were Vedantham Jagannatha Sarma, Vempati Peda Satyam, Vempati Chinna Satyam and AyyankiTāndava Krishna. He also trained the temple dancers, who include Duggirala Jagadamba of Maṇḍapeta and Srīrajitam. Non-Kūcipūḍi artistes like T. Bala Saraswathi, Ramayya Pillai, Mylapore Gouri Amma and Tara Chowdary came to him for training in Abhinaya. Late Smt. Bala Saraswati who herself was Abhinaya Saraswati, publicly declared that the Kūcipūḍi art of *Abhinaya* as taught to her by Vedantham Lakshmi Narayana Sastri had opened her eyes to a new world of dance and beauty of which she had not been aware until then” as quoted by Ragini Devi in “*Yakṣagāna Marg*” (Sarma, 2006). His methodical approach laid the technical foundation for the modern Kuchipudi *mārgam*.

In the early thirties when the art form was facing a crisis, he along with his son Jagannatha Sarma, one of the most popular female impersonators of that time and AyyankiTāndava Krishna extensively toured India performing Kūcipūḍi Dance. He is an incomparable performer, Guru, and Choreographer, who unfortunately did not get the deserved recognition in his times. These skilled and proficient exponents strengthened this dance further with individual inputs, often highlighting one aspect to another. Along with solo repertoire they have choreographed traditional *Nṛtya Nāṭaka* (dance-dramas) with mythological themes like *Mohini-Bhāsmāsura*, *Hariścandra*

etc. After Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, we can call Vempati Chinna Satyam as the “Architect of the Modern Solo Tradition”. Vempati Chinna Satyam (1928–2012) occupies the highest place in shaping Kuchipudi’s contemporary identity. He codified *aḍavus* and created a structured pedagogical repertoire, choreographed iconic *Nṛtya-Nāṭakams* such as *Śrī Krishna Parijātham*, *Chanḍālīka*, and *Kṣīrasāgaramanthanam* (Sarma, 2015). His aesthetic vision clean lines, subtle *abhinaya*, musical richness became the global face of Kuchipudi.

In 1960s, Kūcipūḍi Gurus adapted new invocatory items to add into the Kūcipūḍi solo tradition. They adopted compositions by poets of those days like Devulapalli Krishna Sastry, BalantarapuRajanikantharao and others for this purpose. In Kūcipūḍi repertoire *Jati Kaṭṭu* was initially performed by young dancers as interludes in the longer *Yakṣagānas*. *Jatiswaram* was later added into Kūcipūḍi solo repertoire. The famous *Jatiswaram* in *Attana Raga* and *Ādi Tāla* is believed to have been written by the *Siddhabatthula* brothers of *Peddapulivarru* in late 19th –early 20th century. The original musical structure was elaborated upon by BokkaKumaraSwāmy and it was choreographed by Vedantam LakshmiNarayana Sastry (Sundari, 2005). Interesting to know that a *Svara Jati* which had *sāhitya* lines like: *Saami thanivitheera* to the correspondent lines “*sāNiDāNiSāNiDā*”. Even the original lyrics bear a *mukutam* “*Kotayārcita*”, its authorship to one *Jangama Kotayya*. It is quoted that late Vedantam Lakshmi Narayana Sastry adapted this *Swarajati* to Kūcipūḍi dance more than sixty or seventy years ago and had also performed it himself for over two hours at a felicitation function held in his honour in Madras. It is rarely seen in today’s performance. Kūcipūḍi Bhāgavathulu incorporated *Śabdams* too, although *Śabdams* are common to all South Indian classical Traditions. These *Bhāgavathulu* have taken the *Śabdams* based more on *Vaishnava* orientation. *DasāvātāraŚabdām* depicting the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu used to be performed as an interlude by junior dancers as part of dance dramas. Origin of *Śabdām* lies in the earlier court traditions where such *Śabdams* would be performed either in praise of a local deity or of the king or patron. In Kūcipūḍi, lyrics have sometimes been modified to create new *Śabdams* out of older texts rendered in praise of a King. For example, a *Śabdām* referring to Bobbili Pedda Venkatendruru and starting with the lines “*RāRā, DāmeraTimmendraKumāra*” is being rendered with suitable modifications of lyrics as “*Krishna Śabdām*” addressing God Krishna instead of the King whom it originally saluted. That is why we find a lot of similarities in the *Sāhitya* or literature of these two *Śabdams*. There is another *Śabdām* “*Krishna Janana Śabdām*”, which lyrics are ascribed to one “*Koti Reddy*” who dedicates the work to *Vārāvataapuram*. Another famous *Śabdām* which we hardly see among the present performers is “*Maṇḍodari Śabdām*”, depicting the courtship of *Rāvana* and *Maṇḍodari*, was popularized around 1960’s. In this item the dancer introduce herself as *Rājanartaki* in the court of Krishna Deva Raya. Another popular *Śabdām* in Kūcipūḍi repertoire is *Gajendra Mokṣam*, popularly known as “*MandukaŚabdām*”. *Manduka* means frog. This item was composed by *Kāśīnāthayya* of Tanjavur and has been taught as an oral tradition. Only an abbreviated version of this *Śabdām* is presently performed in Kūcipūḍi. The complete version which contains references to the poet and patron king has been recovered from Bhāgavatala Melam Tradition of *SaliyaMaṅgalam* or *SūlaMaṅgalam* in Tanjavur District and has since been reintroduced to the

KūcipūḍiMārgam (Vissa Apparao, n.d.). The subsequent decades have seen a lot of new choreography using existing *Śabdams*, adapting non-*Śabdām* poetry to the *Śabdām* form or the creation of new lyrics for performance as *Śabdām*.

*Ślokāms* are descriptive verses pertaining to Lord Krishna, drawn from “*Sree Krishna Karṇamṛtam*” and are interpreted through *Abhinaya* and precede full length depiction of longer songs taken from *SriKrishna Līla Tarangini*. Along with these the rich compositions or *Kīrthanās* of Annamayya, Tyagaraja, Muthuswami Deekshithulu, Munipalle Subrahmanya Kavi (Adhyatmaka Ramayana) were well adapted into Kūcipūḍi solo repertoire. The interpretation of a *Kīrthana* in Kūcipūḍi tradition largely follows imagination of individual choreographers and dancers. These *Kīrthanās* are sung either in *Bhajana Sāmpradāya* or *Utsava Sāmpradāya*. Sometimes these *Kīrthanās* are interspersed with rhythmic passages like *Jatis* and *Konugolu* (Narayan, 2005).

*Taramgam* are the songs taken from “*Sree Krishna Līla Tarangini*” written by Yati Narayana Theertha in Sanskrit. It is written in a form of *Yakṣagāna*, the story starts from the birth of Krishna to *Rukmini Swayamvaram*. KūcipūḍiBhāgavatalu incorporated this into *Yakṣagāna Nāṭakam* and *Kalāpams* of Kūcipūḍi wherever it is fitted. For solo interpretation, important changes were made to *Taramgam*. They focused more on exhibition of complicated foot work including dancing on the edges of a brass plate with a pot full of water being balanced on the head. The first such solo composition of *Taramgam* is believed to have been done by *Chintha Venkaaramayya* and performed as such for the first time by *VedanathamRaghavayya* in Madras in 1930 (Sundari, 2005). In subsequent decades, *Taramgam* became a signature item of Kūcipūḍi solo dance tradition. In addition to *Taramgam* Kūcipūḍi Gurus began to add *Tillāna* into their performance list.

Kūcipūḍi artists excelled in *abhinaya* especially in *Sātvikābhinaya*. They selected *Padams* and *Jāvaḷis*, which give a great scope for *Sātvikābhinaya*. *Kshetrayya* of 17th century, native of *Movva* village, which is adjacent village to Kūcipūḍi, was a famous *Padakarta*. His *Padams* were addressed to Krishna, the presiding deity of that village. All his *Padams* are consigned with an intense quality. In addition to *Kshetrayya Padams* KūcipūḍiBhāgavatalu used *SāraṅgapāṇiPadās*, *Dharmapūri Jāvaḷis*, *Dāsu Srīramulu’s*, and *Ghanam Śīnayya’s Jāvaḷis* extensively (Baby Rao, 1999). It seems curious that such explicit *Śrīngāra* could be so convincingly performed by the *Bhāgavatalu* of a tradition in which the participation of women was prohibited ironically. It is also stated that some KūcipūḍiBhāgavatalu interacted with the *Kaḷāvantulu* (Devadāsīs of Telugu land) and both acknowledge such interactions. This may have led to the exchange of artistic techniques and material instead of being a one-way process as is usually assumed. We can even assume that the experienced and knowledgeable Kūcipūḍi *Bhāgavatalu* must have provided some valuable inputs for the *Bhāgavataṁ* of *Kaḷāvantulu*.

## Conclusion

The renaissance of Kuchipudi from a community-based *Nāṭyamēlam* tradition to a sophisticated solo *nṛtya* repertoire is a testament to its adaptability and artistic depth. Rooted in centuries-old *Bhakti*-infused performance culture, Kuchipudi evolved by responding to new audiences, urban cultural forms,

and institutional frameworks. The genius of maestros like Chinta Venkataramayya, Vedantam Raghavayya, Vempati Peda Satyam, Pasumarthy Krishnamurthy, Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, and Vempati Chinna Satyam transformed Kuchipudi into a solo art capable of conveying nuanced expression, rhythmic virtuosity, and narrative beauty. Cinema expanded its reach; Chennai became its creative laboratory; and the SNA seminars confirmed its classical legitimacy. Today, the solo Kuchipudi dancer stands as the culmination of centuries of innovation, embodying the living continuity of an art form that continues to flow like a river adapting, reshaping, and carrying its heritage forward with renewed vitality.

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