

# STRUCTURING OF THE KUCHIPUDI DANCE FORM: THE TRAILBLAZING TRIO

T PARVATI VARDHINI

*Research Scholar, Department of Dance, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts & Communication, University of Hyderabad, Telangana, India*

## ABSTRACT

*During the Indian national freedom movement, the countries indigenous performing art forms, like music and dance gained currency. Diverse cultural art forms emerged from the different regions of India and aided in developing a sense of national pride. The dance forms of the country received attention from the political and cultural leaders of the land; and, by the time the country gained independence, four major “classical” dance forms—Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Kathakali and Manipuri—had been revived and gained recognition as “classical” dance forms and were showcased at the first dance seminar organized at Delhi, in 1958. Kuchipudi, Odissi and Mohiniattam dance forms, were given recognition much later. Kuchipudi, the classical dance form of the state of Andhra Pradesh, is also the name of the village from which this art form originated. There are several historical evidences of the existence of the art form, for over five hundred years in the village of Kuchipudi. The dance form was recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the apex cultural body of India, when a Kuchipudi Natya Seminar was held at Hyderabad in the year 1959, to prove the classicity of the dance form. This dance tradition, practiced by the hereditary families of the Kuchipudi village, has evolved over the years and its journey into the twentieth century as a solo and dance drama genre, has seen significant changes in the technique, content and performance practices. In this paper, the role of the hereditary artists, who founded dance institutes and initiated non-hereditary artists into the fold of the art form will be discussed.*

**Keyword:-** *Kuchipudi dance, hereditary artists, institutionalization, Vedantam Parvatisam, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Vempati Peda Satyanarayana*

## Introduction

This work will be looking at the contribution of the hereditary artists from the Kuchipudi village, towards the dance forms proliferation, through private institutions in the twentieth century<sup>1</sup>. The performance trajectory of the Kuchipudi art form – Kalapa’s, Yakshagana, Solos to Nritya rupakam-dance drama, Dramas-- have been investigated, extensively by scholars. The change which was happening to the Kuchipudi dance form was a combined endeavour of all the Kuchipudi artists. The Kuchipudi *trio* – Vempati Venkatanarayana (1871- 1935), Chinta Venkataramayya (1860-1949) and Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry(1886-1956) -- had evolved the Kuchipudi dance form with their expertise. Vempati Venkatanarayana was known for his expertise in the Kalapas (adaptation of a small episode/incident from the Bhagavatam and performed by two or three artists). Chinta Venkataramayya, the creator of Kuchipudi Yakshaganas (an entire story from the Puranas told with an amalgamation of music, dance and theatrics, including a large cast of artists) and Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, popularised the solo dance tradition in Kuchipudi dance. All three had passed away by the middle of the twentieth century and it was left to their children and students a to carry forward their works. It was at this juncture that a set of three artists took on the mantle of taking the dance form to the next stage of its growth and expansion by opening institutions to teach the dance to non-hereditary artists.

The artistic legacy of the above mentioned artists was carried forward by their students -- Vedantam Parvatisam, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma and Vempati Peda Satyam to the next generation. Their contributions are important to this work, as all three of them were involved in the process of founding institutions in the village of Kuchipudi and outside it also. They contributed towards dissemination of the Kuchipudi dance form; and, were involved in the framing of the curriculum and writing literature on the dance form.

<sup>1</sup> It is a small part of a chapter in my doctoral dissertation to be submitted.

## VEDANTAM PARVATISAM

Vedantam Parvatisam (1920-2005), had trained in the Kuchipudi art form under Chinta Venkataramayya, Vedantam Ramakrishnayya and Vedantam Raghavayya. He trained in music under Yeleswarapu Seetaramanjaneyulu, at the Kuchipudi village. For any art form the basic foundation has to be strong and likewise in Kuchipudi dance, this strong base is laid by teaching and practicing the adugus/steps and jatis daily by the gurus. This training in the art form, makes it easier to dance, render dialogues, sing and enact while performing. Parvatisam reminiscences about his initial training and career on stage, “Starting as side characters, moving on to prominent characters, the artists were then taught entry performances. Thereafter they were initiated into dancing more *nrityam* sequences – the entire training process supervised by the leader of the troupe” (Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir 1993, 82) He took to the usual performative route of taking part in the Yakshaganas and Kalapas staged by the Kuchipudi artists; and, progressing from small roles to larger ones Parvatisam, is remembered by his students<sup>2</sup> as a firm guru, who gave them the wings to perform with a lot of freedom through his teachings.

Vedantam Parvatisam, was one of the first hereditary artists to start a school, outside the Kuchipudi village in Gudivada (a small town in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh), in the year 1939 and after some time returned back to the village and started the Kuchipudi Kalakshetram in the year 1957. This school paved the way for the establishment of Siddhendra Kalakshetra with a permanent structure in the Kuchipudi village. He worked there as an instructor and systematized the basic fundamental steps. Parvatisam, “contributed several articles to various journals; published works on the technique and repertoire of Kuchipudi which includes *Bhamakalapam* (1964), *Prahlada Natakam* (1981), *Kuchipudi Melakartalu* (1981)... known for his singular contribution in preparing and compiling the basics of Kuchipudi dance and documentation of traditional dance dramas and *Pagativeshas*” (Jonnalagadda 1996). Parvatisam wanted the adherents of the Kuchipudi dance, to learn the different facets of the art form from the experts of various field. Parvatisam established a holistic way of learning the art form at his institute.

## VEDANTAM PRAHLADA SARMA

The other Kuchipudi artist to strengthen the institutionalization process was Vedantam Prahlada Sarma (1929-1991). Initiated into dance by his father Vedantam Rattayya Sarma, he continued his training with Vempati Venkatanarayana and Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, learning the various facets of the art form. He is the only artist from the Kuchipudi village, to have performed in all the four existing *melams* (troupes) of the time – “*Mahankali, Chinta, Pasumarthi and Vedantam.*” He would portray female characters like Seetha, Chandramathi, Leelavathi Subhadra, Sasirekha and Mohini in the Yakshaganas and enacted the Dadinamma and Balintha roles with dexterity; and, at the same time performed male characters like Devendra, Arjuna, Krishna and Rama.

Vedantam Prahlada Sarma was appointed as the Principal of Eluru branch of Siddhendra Kalakshetram and trained many students there. Prahlada Sarma,<sup>3</sup> evolved a systematic and structured approach to teaching Kuchipudi dance and recorded the “*Adugulu*” (basic steps) practised by the hereditary Kuchipudi gurus. *Kuchipudi Nritya Manjari* (1991),<sup>4</sup> a book on Kuchipudi dance was published by him. Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, was a visiting faculty member at the University of Hyderabad and at the Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University and contributed towards the consolidation of Kuchipudi dance’s theoretic and performing courses at the Universities.

## VEMPATI PEDA SATYANARAYANA

The Kuchipudi artist who influenced the dance form in a very relevant way was -- Vempati Peda Satyanarayana also, known as Peda Satyam (1922-1982), both in the Kuchipudi village and in the professional circles. It was his guru Chinta Venkataramayya, who advised and personally entrusted him to Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, to train under him. “Peda Satyam’s learning under Lakshminarayana Sastry was more

<sup>2</sup> Vedantam Radheshyam, Pasumarthy Kesava Prasad, Vedantam Ramalinga Sastry, Mahankali Suryanarayana, Chinta Seetaramanjaneyulu, Pasumarthy Rattayya Sarma and Jayarama Rao.

<sup>3</sup> Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Vedantam Raghavayya, Gudimetla Krishna, Yamini Krishnamurthi, D Y Sampath Kumar, K P Chandrika are some of his students.

<sup>4</sup> Sarma M Nagabhushana. 2016, 220.

passive, watching and observing the practice and performance of Jagannatha Sarma, and reading the books he had access to. Disheartened, Peda Satyam decided to try his luck in learning to paint (a skill with which he was well endowed), at the National College, Machilipatnam, in the year 1939, under Adavi Bapiraju – the renowned painter. This talent, helped him in bringing out the beauty of the form in later periods, when he was working as a dance director in films. This association with Bapiraju, helped him to gain entry into films; first as an artist and later as dance director. He started his career in films with the film “Meera Bai” where he performed the famous “Kapalika dance.” Peda Satyam went on to choreograph dance in over 300 films. During his time in Madras, he was able to watch maestros like Uday Shankar, Nataraj-Sakuntala and Menaka Ramanarayana’s dance performances. Also he happened to meet Ram Gopal – the famous Bharatanatyam artist and at his invitation, went to Bangalore to teach Kuchipudi at his[Ram Gopal’s] school and in turn learnt Bharatanatyam and Kathakali there. This opened up a whole new world to him. Earlier, he had teamed up with Vedantam Raghavayya and formed a troupe -- Prabhakar Natya Mandali -- along with Tandav Krishna and Pasumurthy Krishnamurthy. They would perform traditional numbers and thematic dances (inspired by watching the dances of Uday Shankar and other dancers) like the Hunter Dance, Radha Krishna and folk dances. In all his writings in magazines, Peda Satyam, emphasizes on the necessity, for establishing a dance school to teach Kuchipudi dance. Peda Satyam and Raghavayya established the ‘Kuchipudi Kala Vigyana Kendram’ at Madras and later with his wife Sowdamini, established institutes like ‘Udaya Bharati Nritya Niketan’ and the ‘Kuchipudi Kalakendram,’ and taught Kuchipudi dance. With a view to teach the dance form in a systematic manner, he framed a syllabus for Kuchipudi dance, in which equal importance was given to the learning of music and theory. It was his passion for the art form that made him work tirelessly for it, by way of choreographing newer dance numbers, writing articles in various magazines and establishing dance institutions to teach the form. Peda Satyam was involved in establishment of the Siddhendra Kalakshetra at Kuchipudi village and later after he settled down in Kuchipudi village.

His choreographies in the films,<sup>5</sup> are an enormous source, for understanding his technique in dance. The symmetry and sculptural quality seen in the Kuchipudi dance, are his influences on the dance form. Rajasulochana, a dancer/actor, in Telugu films, who had worked with all the Kuchipudi dance directors in films, remembers Peda Satyam, being a hard task master and would make her rehearse any number of times, till she got the movement right, Peda Satyam<sup>6</sup> trained many students at his institutes and a few of them became performers and teachers of remarkable calibre. The one outstanding disciple of his, who took the dance to greater heights and gained national and international recognition for it was, Vempati Chinna Satyam.

## CONCLUSION

The evolution of the Kuchipudi dance into the twentieth century, was actuated by these three hereditary artists -- Vedantam Parvatisam, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma and Vempati Peda Satyam--- who established institutions and trained students, to pass on their knowledge. They created the “Spaces” for non-hereditary people to learn the art form (which was, until then the preserve of the hereditary artists). All the three artists realized the importance of changing with the times and the world around them, and responded responsibly, by strengthening the existing performance practices and structuring it to suit the needs of the era.

## REFERENCES

- [1]. Jonnalagadda, Anuradha. (1996). Tradition and Innovation in Kuchipudi Dance (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation). University of Hyderabad.
- [2]. Kamath, H.M. (2012). Aesthetics, Performativity and Performing Maya: Imagining Gender in the Textual and Performance Traditions of Telugu South India (Doctoral Dissertation). Emory University of Georgia, USA.
- [3]. Parvateesam, Vedantam, “Solo Dance in Kuchipudi.” Kuchipudi Mahotsav (1993): 82-84.

<sup>5</sup> The evolution of Kuchipudi in films over the course of the twentieth century offers an invaluable visible archive that indexes the ways in which gurus negotiated their own identities and reinvented Kuchipudi as classical (Putcha 2011, 120).

<sup>6</sup> Vedantam Raghavayya, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Sumathy Kaushal and Yadavalli Rama are some of his students.

- [4]. Peda Satyam, 'Vempati Vennakati Vishayalu' Bharata Praja Abhimani, n.d. pp 10-12)
- [5].Putchu, R.S.(2011). Revisiting the Classical: A Critical History of Kuchipudi Dance. (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA.
- [6].Rajasulochana.Interviewed by Katyayani Thota at Chennai, November 18, 2012.
- [7].Reddy,Raja.Personal Interview.By Prof Anuradha J and Vardhini,TP.26-04-2017.
- [8] .Sarma M Nagabhushana. Kuchipudi: Gurus, Performers and Performance Traditions. Hyderabad: Ranga Sampada, 2016.
- [9]. Sastry, Ramalinga, Vedantam. Personal Interview.By Vardhini,TP.26-09-2015.
- [10].Shenkar, Bharani. Personal Interview.By Vardhini,TP.28-11-2015.
- [11]. Soneji, Davesh. (2004). Performing Satyabhama: Text, Context, Memory and Mimesis in Telugu Speaking South India. (Doctoral Dissertation). McGill University, Montreal, Quebec.
- [12]. Thota, Katyayani. (2016). Stage to Screen, And Back: A Study of The Dialogue Between Kuchipudi and Telugu Cinema. (Doctoral Dissertation). University of Hyderabad.
- [13]. *Vyakti Shakti Natyakala Tapasvi* –Vempati Peda Satyam, nn, nd pp 11.

