

Changing Approaches in Dance Research with special focus on Kuchipudi

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ABSTRACT

The traditional pedagogy in all Indian art forms, and in particular Dance, was oral. The teaching of Dance transformed quite a bit in the 20th century from the traditional Gurukula Paddhati, with the establishment of ace institutions for Dance when it got institutionalized with systematic syllabus-oriented teaching, - a process which began in the early 20th Century in India. In the field of academics, the pursuit of research is often considered the pinnacle of intellectual learning. This is true even in the academic study of dance. This paper's primary focus is on the research works undertaken and submitted by various scholars exploring the field of Kuchipudi dance. The focus of this article is limited to the research works submitted to the University of Hyderabad (UoH) and Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University (PSTU), and a few doctoral theses work from the Diaspora. This article traces the beginnings of research on Kuchipudi dance form and explains the varied themes and the changing trends in 20th and 21st centuries. It classifies various research works as descriptive, narrative, and historical accounts and critical analysis. Discussing the trends in research, the paper brings out the transitions in the themes from narrative-based works to in-depth critical studies. It puts forth that myriad themes were explored as part of research exploring and unearthing facets around the Kuchipudi dance form have become an invaluable resources as they fill in the lacuna that existed in traditional formats of learning. As well that research works produced under institutionalized setups, making scientific and empirical knowledge base on Kuchipudi accessible which augment academic learning.

Keyword: *Dance Research, Kuchipudi, Dance Education, Institutionalization, Academic Research*

1. INTRODUCTION

The traditional pedagogy in all Indian art forms, and in particular Dance, was oral which was termed as *Gurukula Paddhati*. Until recent times no academic courses led to a certification or degree associated with teaching or learning these art forms. Continuous research and reinvention of art and of their selves are an indispensable part of an artiste's life. However, in pursuit of creative endeavors, artists invariably explore knowingly or unknowingly and formally or informally. Otherwise, the traditional art forms passed down from several generations across the centuries would not have survived to date.

The teaching of Dance transformed quite a bit in the 20th century from the traditional *Gurukula Paddhati*, with the establishment of ace institutions for Dance. Dance got institutionalized with systematic syllabus-oriented teaching being introduced in these institutions. Introduction of Dance as a course began in the early 20th Century in India. It is in Shantiniketan that Dance was first introduced as part of the curriculum leading to a certification/diploma in the year 1919 [1].

In the case of Kuchipudi, in 1957, Sri Vedantam Parvatheesam started the school "*Kuchipudi Kalaakshetram*" in Kuchipudi village, which in later years gave an impetus for the establishment of "*Siddhendra Kalaakshetram*." [2]. This was the beginning of bringing Kuchipudi into the realms of an institution and has further led to the establishment of Government Music and Dance Colleges during the 1950-the 60s by the then Andhra Pradesh Government all over the state. These colleges offered certificate and diploma courses in Kuchipudi.

Kuchipudi was introduced as a course curriculum in the University system in the late 1980s. "In the 1980s, two universities, University of Hyderabad and Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University started post-graduate courses in Kuchipudi. In fact, the later also started the Bachelor's degree course. These courses were primarily designed to strengthen the academic dimension and develop a scholastic approach towards Kuchipudi" [3]. Subsequently, these universities also started research programs which is a logical development in the process. It may be noted that the PhD program in the Department of Dance, University of Hyderabad started in the early 1990s and in the Department of Dance, Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University around 2005. Interestingly, there is an increasing trend towards introducing Kuchipudi at the post-graduate level in a few private universities in India and abroad. However, it must also be noted that there are very few public universities in India that offer post-graduate courses in Kuchipudi, leading to research programmes.

1.1 Scope and Limitations

Introduction This paper's primary focus is on the research works undertaken and submitted by various scholars in the field of Kuchipudi dance to both University of Hyderabad (UoH) and Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University (PSTU), and a few doctoral theses work from the Diaspora [4]. The paper also discusses the changing approaches in the areas of research over a period of almost three decades in the 20th and 21st centuries, i.e., from the 1990s till date, and brings to light the emerging trends with reference to methodologies, subject areas, and analysis. This study, however, does not consider the critical reviews, articles, biographies, or books contributed by various authors and scholars in individual capacity even though they are a part of the knowledge system.

1.2 Methodology

The study falls under the qualitative research method, more specifically the case study approach which allows for a focused and in-depth analysis. Both primary and secondary sources of data collection like published thesis works, journals, articles, and personal interviews were used as appropriate.

2. Research in Kuchipudi

2.1 Indian Universities

Though the paper discusses the works of the above-mentioned two Universities (PSTU and UoH), it is imperative to mention Sri. Chinta Ramanadham's thesis "*Kuchipudi yakshagana sahyamu, sampradayamu, prayogamu*," 1979 from Andhra University in Telugu. He is renowned as the first one from the Kuchipudi hereditary families to have completed the doctoral work and the first on the subject related to Kuchipudi. Further, from 1995-to 2019, six works on Kuchipudi [5] were completed from the Department of Dance, University of Hyderabad, and during 2007-2016, a total of ten PhD's were carried out on Kuchipudi related subjects [6] In Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University's Dance Department.

Although the subject area of all these works is related to Kuchipudi, focal areas covering several exciting aspects of the dance form are seen. They can be classified into the following categories.

- History and Evolutionary process
- Changes and Changing trends

- Comparative studies and Interrelationships

Each of them brings out in-depth analysis and answers the questions like *Why What and How* of the subject dealt.

From a cursory reading of these sixteen doctoral works, it is evident that a few works dealt with the history of the form, while a few other works focused on comparative studies between Kuchipudi and other forms/formats at a macro level. Another set of works explored the interrelationship of Dance with other fields like yoga and tourism, inferring the impact on Kuchipudi, and few works focused on the social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of the eco-system of the form.

The first significant and scholarly study on Kuchipudi, titled "Traditions and Innovations in Kuchipudi" by Anuradha, details the long evolutionary process of Kuchipudi from traditional Yakshaganas to modern-day dance dramas and solo performances, providing in-depth and methodical analysis [7]. This research has unearthed several documentary pieces of evidence in the form of personal papers of legendary gurus, palm leaf manuscripts, government revenue records and the like., and is now an emphatic reference for many researchers and scholars researching Kuchipudi [8]. This work also deals with the performance tradition and technique of Kuchipudi and the changes that came about owing to the socio-political changes in the Andhra society between 1880-1980.

Out of the works that have dealt with Kuchipudi *Yakshaganas* as the subject area, one can observe that some of the works are comparative studies presented in a narrative manner, and some have analyzed specific aspects related to a particular area. The various aspects explained in these narratives include comparisons between the origin and history, performance structures, performative texts, the *chaturvidha abhinayas*, etc. It is interesting to note that it was '*Prahlada Yakshaganam*' was chosen by many for their comparative studies. The reasons could be many. It might be because it was the first *Kuchipudi Yakshaganam* which continues to be performed even today in Kuchipudi. Also, the theme of Prahlada is popularly performed in other forms like *Melattur Bhagavata Mela Natakam* and *Tanjavur Yakshaganam*. Yeleswarapu Srinivasulu's research work titled "*Kuchipudi bhagavatula pradarsita yakshaganalalo prathinayaka patralu*" explores a different dimension of this subject area and elucidates on the anti-hero characters in *Kuchipudi Yakshaganas* [9].

Another subject area of Kuchipudi that has been researched extensively is "*Satyabhama*" in '*Bhamakalaapam*' which is almost synonymous with the form. Few works in this aspect portrayed its literary references in Telugu Literature, and several other ethnographic works have focused on the aspect of female impersonation of Satyabhama's character and its portrayal[10]. Interesting analytical work in this area comes from Chinta Ravi Balakrishna's "*Kuchipudi vaari Roopnurupanam-Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma*," which discusses the female impersonation with specific reference to Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, who is known as '*Kaliyuga Satyabhama*' [11] for his outstanding skill in female impersonation.

On the works that have dealt with interrelationships between Kuchipudi and allied fields, the work of Katyayani Thota [12] that established the profound influences Kuchipudi, and Telugu cinema had on each other during the mid to late 20th century is an enjoyable ode to the dance form. This work thoroughly examined the works of hereditary Kuchipudi artists who have worked extensively in the Telugu cinema field and analyzed the after-effects of how this engagement of Kuchipudi artists with cinema brought changes in the form.

On the subject area that dealt with the changes that occurred in the technique and repertoire of Kuchipudi, Yamini Yashoda's thesis detailed how "the difference between *modern yakshaganas* and *nritya rupakas* is narrowing down and becoming difficult to distinguish between the two" [13]. It also brought out the "need to preserve the original texts of *yakshaganas* and make them available for performances without legal hassles"[13]. Speaking about the current scenario of solo performances, the work criticized/pointed out that the "solo genre has become dancer-oriented rather than character-oriented," losing the uniqueness of Kuchipudi.

The reflections of the experience and comparison of training methodologies/pedagogy followed formed the focus area of research work for Parvati Vardhini [1]. A critical understanding and analysis of the aspects of training methodologies of both hereditary and non-hereditary Gurus have come out in this thesis on the Institutionalization of Kuchipudi. While discussing this subject, it is quoted that "the issue of institutionalization is more problematic in the Kuchipudi art form, because of the presence of two extremely diverse kinds of people who must function within the world of Kuchipudi together – the hereditary artistes and the non-hereditary artistes." The work also concludes that

if the aim of such institutionalization is purely to propagate and disseminate the art form to more significant numbers, then this process must be treated as a successful one in the case of Kuchipudi [1]. This research also spoke about the socio-political factors that led to the institutionalization of art forms and the impact on the training systems resulting in changes to performative aspects of the art form.

2.2 From the Diaspora

In this globalized era, Kuchipudi has spread through the length and breadth of this world. Many research works have surfaced from the Diaspora too. One can observe that the researchers went deeper than the historicity of the form, bringing out a critical analysis of the form's history and connecting the missing dots between Kuchipudi and its nativity, gender construct, and Diaspora.

Davesh Soneji, through his research [14], brought out interesting contrasts that exist in the performance practices, especially the portrayal of Satyabhama between the male Brahmin community of Kuchipudi village and the female devadasi and kalavantulu communities of South India. The research also gave an ethnographic account of the traditions and customs of these two communities.

Continuing with the impersonation of Satyabhama by male dancers, Harshita Mruthinti Kamath [15] inspected how the gender construction was used in the portrayal of Satyabhama through female impersonation and elucidated the contrasting features and aesthetics of a male dancer and a female dancer. She further discussed the reconstruction of characters like Madhavi / Madhava and how the presentation of Bhamakalaapam was adapted to suit the urban milieu.

Another scholar from the Indian Diaspora, Rumya Putcha, through her research, elucidated how language-based reorganization of Indian States in 1956 influenced Kuchipudi dance form's recognition as the classical dance form of Andhra Pradesh [16]. The work also critically analyzed the identity politics and relevance of Kuchipudi form to the Telugus in India and worldwide [1]. Interestingly, this work also examined the aspect of 'Telugu Identity' represented through Telugu movies, including classical Dance.

The article seems incomplete without mentioning two other works on Kuchipudi, though completed from universities that are not under the scope of this paper, as they covered different dimensions of the art form and made a valuable contribution to the existing knowledge base. One of them is the thesis of Vedantam Ramalinga Sastry, which gave a detailed account of the evolution of the literary aspects of the form and its changes [17]. And the other is the thesis of Rajyalakshmi Seth which focused on the development of Kuchipudi dance as one of the Indian classical dance forms of India between 1920-2000 [18] and interlinked the historicity and the sociological aspects of the form.

3. Conclusion

Research in Dance has established itself as a valuable pillar in the academics of dance. The following inferences can be drawn from the analysis discussed in this paper. While some thesis works are more descriptive in nature, where facts are stated, narratives and historical accounts provided, a few other works provided critical analysis. They discussed the impact of certain historical, pedagogical, and performative changes on the form that have determined its journey. Having unearthed the historicity and ethnicity of the form with empirical pieces of evidence, these works have become valuable reference points for all the researchers. While dealing with the form, the analytical works not just investigated the evolution of the form in terms of technique, repertoire, and presentation but also the more relevant aspects of socio-political and cultural changes that directly or indirectly impacted the art form.

After all, like other art forms, Kuchipudi is a part of the society from which it originated and nurtured. The entire fraternity of scholars, musicians, and dancers is always a subset of the same society in which it must function. Hence, it becomes even more critical for the researchers in the art field to take into account these aspects of social, political, cultural, technological, and global influences on this eco-system and bring in a holistic view. Such works

will also leave us with some unanswered questions and pave the way for further research. A few interesting points come out of this study -

1. Researchers are trying to bring out in-depth critical analysis on the already established historical facts.
2. In search of newer and different topics, some works are unearthing neglected/ignored areas into the limelight.
3. However, sometimes, there seems to be a lack in striking a balance between historicity and modern times.

In my opinion, research on any aspect must be taken up as an attempt to fill the gaps in the existing knowledge base, supported with scientific and empirical pieces of evidence. More objective research with critical analysis, rather than hagiographic studies, should be the direction in this new millennium. Only then the relevance and importance of traditional art forms can be realized and appreciated by the newer generations and society to uphold the traditions with pride.

4. REFERENCES

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- [3]. Jonnalagadda, Anuradha. "Kuchipudi Dance in the past two decades," unpublished article.
- [4]. Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University and the University of Hyderabad are the two Universities that offer masters and Ph. D courses through their Departments of Dance with Kuchipudi specialization. While the Ph. D program in the Department of Dance at the University of Hyderabad started during 1990-91, and it was post 2000, it started in Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University. Earlier to 2000, PhD's in Dance in PSTU were submitted through allied departments of Dance and not considered in this paper. The thesis works from Diaspora are from universities in the USA and Canada.
- [5]. Records were accessed through Indira Gandhi Memorial Library, University of Hyderabad, and also through the OPAC system through the link: <http://igmlnet.uohyd.ac.in:8000/>. There are a total of 22 PhD's awarded in Dance in this University to date. Out of them, only six works deal with Kuchipudi as their subject area.
- [6]. Earlier to 2000, PhD in Dance in Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University was done through allied departments like folk culture/folk arts. Also, Sri Siddhendra Kalakshetram, Kuchipudi, was merged with Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad, in the year 1989, and some of them have completed their masters in Kuchipudi invariably complete their PhD from PSTU, Hyderabad. The records mentioned in this paper were accessed at the Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University Library, Telugu Bhavanam, Osmania University Campus, Hyderabad.
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- [9]. For details, see Yeeswarapu Srinivasulu "Kuchipudi Bhagavatula Pradarsita Yakshaganalalo Pratinayaka Patralu" (PhD diss, Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, 2016)
- [10]. For details see, Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, "Kuchipudi vaari Roopaanurupanam-Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma" (PhD diss, Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, 2016). Critical analysis in this area has also come from the works of scholars like Davesh Soneji, Rumya Putch, and Harshitha Mrutinti Kamath. Refer to From the Diaspora section of this article for further details.
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