

Kuchipudi :

*Gurus, Performers and
Performance Traditions*

M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA

Ranga Sampada

2015

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Performance Traditions***

M. Nagabhushana Sarma

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To

G.M. SHARMA

(GARIKAPATI MURALIKRISHNA SHARMA)

for services rendered to

Kuchipudi

FOREWORD

This book is mainly concerned with Kuchipudi-born dancers and gurus whose stimulating contribution to the art during the last century and a half made the art what it is today. Its phenomenal growth, in spite of the varying shades of patronage it received from time to time, is all the more surprising because, unlike several other classical dance forms of India, it is not endowed with initial advantages. For example, it is not institution-backed as is the case with Sattriya (the Sattras promoted the art and guarded it), or, like Kathak, did not have royal patronage or like Bharatanatyam, was not city-bred for long and had elitist patronage. Kuchipudi is unique in being the only classical dance art of India named after a village of its birth and completely grew in rural environs. However, it made big strides to build a tradition of its own. Then, again, unlike Kathakali, another art form belonging to the Natya Mela tradition, it doesn't demand very elaborate, extremely symbolised presentational techniques. Simple and straightforward in its form and presentation, Kuchipudi fathoms deep into human psyche as many other forms do not. Born in a tiny, remote village it grew enormously to become nationally and internationally prominent; from a single text it amassed a wealth of literature for interpretation and from a single village's, single community's profession, it grew global embracing cross-cultural artistic manifestations.

My fascination for the art form started way back in 1967 when I was associated with Guru Bhagavatula Ramakotaiah who taught me the intricacies of yakshagana and gradually expanded into a passion when, as an active member of the State Sangeet Natak Akademi and, much later, as a member of the executive council of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, I had

associated myself with several projects including a three-levelled Kuchipudi Festival series under the aegis of the Central Akademi. During all these years I have had the good fortune of being closely associated with Kuchipudi maestros right from Vedantam Raghavaiah to Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma. This gave me plenty of opportunities to work in the field - almost as an insider.

Further when I took up the editorial responsibilities of *Nartanam*, a quarterly journal exclusively devoted to the study of Classical Indian dance forms in 2001, I have formulated for myself an agenda which would throw light on the great classical dance forms of India including Kuchipudi. I was concerned both with the lives and achievements of stalwarts of the dance forms and also the artistic and performative transformations that the art forms have been going through. My study has resulted in a series of articles on the work of several Gurus and practitioners. Out of this bulk of work done in the last fifteen years emerged the basic materials for this book.

This volume, hopefully the first in a series of two, is on the work of about forty illustrious masters in the field of Kuchipudi dance. It mainly concentrates on the work of Kuchipudi-born artists with the exception of four non-Kuchipudi teachers belonging to the first batch of the new crop whose work showed diverse expressive ways. This would be a pointer for a later discussion on the non-Kuchipudi-born artists whose work from the last fifty years stands unique in the context of the development of the art form both intrinsically and extrinsically.

M. Nagabhushana Sarma

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to the several Kuchipudi maestros who have given me exclusive interviews. The list includes several veterans - Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Vempati Chinna Satyam, Vedantam Parvateesam, P.V.G. Krishna Sharma, Pasumarthi Venkateswarlu, Chinta Seetamma (wife of Chinta Krishna Murthy), Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Nataraja Ramakrishna, Shanti Vedantam, Kanchanamala and Rangamani, Vedantam Ramachandra Murthy and Ayyanki Bala Prasada Rao;

to Smt. Voleti Rangamani, for sharing her father's work with me;

to G. M. Sharma who accompanied me to several of these interviews;

to my wife, Saraswathi, who would have been the happiest to see this book in print. As with all my other work in life and letters, she discussed the project threadbare with me and willingly allowed me to go to places leaving her sickly soul behind. She spared me the time that enabled me to do this work and gave me the strength to complete it. I remember her with love and gratitude;

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Introduction

Kuchipudi Dance Traditions : An Overview

Three important factors signify the history of Kuchipudi dance in the 20th century - tradition, performance and experimentation. Traditions of performance are very strong in Kuchipudi, both at the religious and artistic levels ; but they are stronger in upholding familial and hereditary obligations. Reverence to age-old customs bind the families to the dance art until recently ; bind the past with the present and bind the originator of the dance art, Siddhendra Yogi, with successive generations of performing families.

The story of Siddhendra Yogi's interaction with the Kuchipudi village elders is by now a commonly accepted story. Whatever be the variations of the story in its details of Siddhendra Yogi's early life, his successful contact with the village elders, his promise to give them and the successive generations of youngsters an honoured and spiritual profession with an obligation that they must agree to propagate the Bhagavatha Katha through dance, music and narration is also an agreed upon contract. It is also an important part of the obligation that every boy born in the Brahmin families of the village must learn the dance art and at least once wear ankle bells and perform the Bhama *vesham* in the presence of the village deities - Ramalingeswara Swamy and Bala Tripura Sundari.

Evidently, this noble, spiritual and well - conceived contract makes Kuchipudi dance a family profession, which ordains them that they learn the art to eke out their living. Hereditary professions are the rule of rural India and instead of the crafts that are usually tugged together for such professional skill, it is the art of dance



Ramalingeswara Swamy Temple at Kuchipudi

that went into the family chores. Not that the Kuchipudi families do not have a profession traditionally : they are all *vaidikis* whose profession is to learn and teach the vedas, participate in the religious rituals and are trained to be professional priests. In addition to that profession as it was from the beginning and in lieu of that in later years, Kuchipudi Brahmin men, young and old, became the votaries at the altar of the village deities - to learn, teach and perform the art of dance as was ordained by Siddhendra Yogi.

Thus performance has become a professional and familial obligation, much revered and practised. Such family performances have become hereditary from one generation to the other, thereby making it a much solicited profession for the expert and a wage-earning prospect for many others. This situation is bound to happen when the best among the trained will have better recognition.

This peculiar social and artistic obligation, in a way, has put a lot of pressure on the Kuchipudi artist. He has to learn and practise dance as a family obligation and a personal faith. His abilities to live up to the best of traditions are often hampered or limited by his own capabilities, his family limitations and the availability of training facilities.

Such a situation, naturally, drove the more provocative artists to find new avenues for showing their talent, by widening

their area of operations or by indulging in new methods of performance strategies. One would believe that Kuchipudi's expanded repertoire is to mainly add up to one's artistic possession and they have a large variety of them - *sabdams*, *tarangams*, *ashtapadis*, *padams*, *javalis* and a whole range of *sringara* literature - to synchronise with the central theme of their *magnum opus* - Bhamā kalapam. But, in course of time, they have also included, inappropriately as some opined, items that were written in appreciation of human beings, mainly the local lords or even petty zamindars. But they always saw to it that these songs of appreciation are modified to suit the general characteristics of their main themes.

In a society made up of people of such artistic talents, not often backed by intellectual discrimination, such inclusions often occur, but the social needs to expand their repertoire was more at the back of their minds than to decide on propriety. Secondly, as performing and constantly touring professionals, they encountered more delicate obligations. As the story goes, they had to oblige wealthy landlords to perform their compositions. If they clicked, by way of popular appreciation and acceptance, they retained the composition. Professional needs sometimes dominate personal propriety, more so when art and artistic sustenance were entrenched in the giver's largesse. And no wonder professional needs often sensitise artistic sensibilities.

If encountering the public domain of artistic viewership is the apparent manifestation of professional arts, there are other inner, in-built, artistic compulsions that often testify the art's strength and excellence. With Kuchipudi people, as with several other performing art groups all over the country, this excellence lies in their compulsive female impersonation.

Female impersonation is a national, if not an international phenomenon in performing arts. On the Indian artistic map, one can detect as many as twenty performing art traditions in which male members of the community don female roles. We have the following well-known arts that follow such a tradition :

Yakshaganam of Karnataka, Bhagavatha mela and Terukoothu of Tamil Nadu, Kathakali of Kerala, Bhavai of Gujarat, Khyal of Rajasthan, Swang of Haryana, Ram Leela and Ras Leela of Uttar Pradesh, Jatra of Bengal, Ankiya Nat of Assam, Chau of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, Kuchipudi, Toorpu Bhagavatham and Veedhi Bhagavatham of Andhra Pradesh and so on.

Many of these are popular forms, locally vibrant and culturally accepted and enacted by village troupes. Some of them are also itinerant. What could be the religious, social and artistic reasons that prompt these performing arts to adopt female impersonation as a matter of tradition?

It is perhaps true, as Prof V.Subramaniam proposed, that in a society in which artists are looked down upon, “one common way in which performing artists safeguarded themselves from such harassment [by priests on one side and law givers on the other] was to relate their profession to religion in several ways and claim divine origins for it¹”. Secondly, as *Natya* is often compared to a *yagna*, it “gradually led to the exclusion of women as ‘unclean’ from the *Natya yagna*”². There is also a third reason. It is evident that participation of women in the vedic rituals was approved. Even during the *Natya Sastra* period both male and female dancers took part in dance - dramas together, but, with successive foreign invasions, particularly after that of the Huns, exclusion of women from public participation took shape gradually as a measure of protection, and exclusion from religious rituals was justified on the basis of (menstrual) uncleanliness. “It was in this later context of treating *natya* as *yagna* with attributes of ritual purity that the exclusive male dance- drama traditions of Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela were shaped by Agnihotris³”.

It looks as though Prof.Subrahmaniam, in enumerating these reasons, has Kathakali in his mind more than Kuchipudi. The dichotomy between the priests and the law-givers leading to, female impersonation as a compromise, is only theoretically viable and never in practice, especially in South India. His second proposition of claiming uncleanliness as a point of rejection in

house-hold rites as well as performances is true, because of their ancestral beliefs and practices. The foreign invader's theory also does not apply to South Indian art practices as it did to the North Indian ones.

It is not difficult to surmise more probable reasons as to why female impersonation in Kuchipudi dance is more of a professional obligation and a social necessity. Siddhendra Yogi only asked young boys to be initiated into dance and not girls, which proposition was acceptable to the Brahmin elders since, in professional chores, women did not have a say. Even in practice this seems to be the norm, since we know that according to the first known source with regard to the "Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu" - the "Machupalli Kaifiyat" - two male Bhagavathulu donned the roles of women and one as man to render the story of Sambeta Gurava Raju. So the oath and the practice synchronise to prove that in Kuchipudi, eversince the art was in practice, female impersonation was the order of artistic endeavour.

Interestingly, there were several family performing groups (*melams* of Yakshagana⁴) in Andhra which were itinerant in nature. Popular among them in the last quarter of the 18th and the first quarter of the 19th century were Lepakshi Vari Melam, Vemulapalli Vari Melam, Dharmapuri Vari Melam, Tadipatri Vari Melam, Chukkaluri Vari Melam, Denuvakonda Vari Melam, Santha veluri Vari Melam, Narasingapalli Vari Melam etc.

There are texts written exclusively for each of these Melams. None of them mentioned a female artist even in passing, though texts like the Santha Veluri Melam mentioned the names of the major performers in their "Naandi".

So one can deduce that it has been a practice eversince performing troupes on tour did not entertain women in their cast. The reason then is obvious that, in addition to their sastraic prohibition for "uncleanliness", the major objection to women donning women's roles emanated more from professional demands than on the religious. Since all these groups are itinerant by nature

and necessity, they could not take their women as actors since the women had to take care of the children and the elderly at home and also the family gods, and continue the daily chores of rituals. Since the tours were long, sometimes extending to six months, women following them as actors was almost ruled out, not though for artistic reasons. However, this is also to be mentioned here that until recent times, women in Kuchipudi families never had any training in the art of dance! Familial obligations and professional needs thus conditioned the presence of female members of the community to don female roles.

In fact, the fame and name of Kuchipudi, at least partly, depends on the artistic needs of female impersonation in Bhama kalapam, the one text that dominated their performance history which is also a text with a female character as the only major character in the play. As such a Kuchipudi artist's predicament is not only in donning a female role, but in donning the most important one and its artistic excellence solely depends on the "viraha" aspects of *sringara*!

Thus, it became a necessity for generations of actors not only to don the role of Bhama, but do it creditably so that their professional perfection would enable their standing in the field and would enhance their chances of a satisfying livelihood!

Female Impersonation and the Aesthetics of Transformation :

Right from the days of Vempati Venkatanarayana, the first great Bhama *veshadhari* in the last century and a quarter to our own contemporary, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, through the work of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, Vedantam Raghavaiah and Prahlada Sarma, great care is taken in the transformation of a male actor into a female character.



Laxminarayana Sastry, in his detailed explication of *padams*, gives two words to denote the process : *antarsutra vivechana* and *baahya rupa vivechana*⁴ : i.e., the understanding and discriminatory use of internal rules (of characterisation) and the judicious use of the external manifestation of character portrayal.

Eversince the yakshagana gained importance, other areas of acting have to be learnt and performed. Importance to *tamasa* characters and those of the traditional characters of the queen-mother dominate. Child characters have come to play an important role, giving scope for young actors to work with mature actors. The role of the *tamasa* characters like Hiranya kasipa or Banasura, have gained currency and demanded an equal importance, along with the actors of the female roles. Music has expanded its territory to include all moods of human experience. Chinta Venkataramaiah and his large band of actors helped to create a new genre and elevate it to an equally classical status as that of Bhama kalapam.

The pagati vesham came in as an interlude. It was at best used as a stop-gap arrangement for those actors who could not settle down in the traditionally-accepted areas of entertainment. The serious attempts of the young, inspired now by all-India experiments in solo presentations, gave good dividends. Aided strongly by the teaching methods of Laxminarayana Sastry, the young group, consisting of Ayyanki Tandava Krishna, Vedantam Raghavaiah, Vempati Peda Satyam, Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy and Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma started experimenting with a new format, with half a dozen varied, disconnected items, selected both from the traditional repertoire and new choreographies to make up for a three hour bill and gained popularity. Meanwhile, Laxminarayana Sastry, with Tandava Krishna and his own son Jagannadha Sarma had a whirlwind tour of Andhra, Madras, Hyderabad and Poona where he was received with great enthusiasm. Uday Shankar himself found Sastry's *hastabhinaya* fascinating and requested the Guru to come to Almora to teach.

But this was also to be a short-lived experiment, for many of the proponents found a footing in the newly emerging cinema

field. That they did not stop the experiment even after they joined the movies did not help much because of their new profession's compulsive demands. But the experiment continued in another garb by a large group of talented artists, who started migrating to district towns to start schools to teach Kuchipudi. The earliest crop of this new teaching community - Vedantam Parvateesam, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Bhagavathula Ramakotaiah and others - with a good many years of experience in the main stream Kuchipudi, took the cue from their seniors and started composing short pieces for the sake of their young students, male and female, along with the traditionally viable pieces like the *Dasavatara sabdam*, *tarangam* and the like.

All these experiments, taking place at different district centres all over Andhra have culminated when Vempati Chinna Satyam started his school in Madras (now Chennai) to teach students, mainly female, from a non-Telugu background. These new challenges faced by Satyam led him to experiment in a new set of paradigms that suited both the situation and the new crop of student population.

Inspired by the experiments made in Bharatanatyam and embedded with native experience, Chinna Satyam embarked on a new course of experimentation with lyrically rich dance dramas. Though they divorced the *vachika* from the actors, Satyam compensated it with tilting music and an emotive text. Some of the best experiments in the area of dance dramas would go to the credit of the triumvirate - Chinna Satyam, Bhujangaraya Sarma and Sangeeta Rao.

Similar experiments, in the traditional format, were successfully undertaken by teachers at various cities and towns, especially Vedantam Prahlada Sarma and Bhagavathula Ramakotaiah. Their edited versions of traditional yakshaganas like *Rama Natakam*, *Prahlada* and *Sasirekha Parinayam* offered rich visual experience. Simultaneously, along with Chinna Satyam, all these teachers choreographed new pieces, this time turning to Telugu lyrical lore. From Annamayya to Balantrapu Rajakantha

Rao, to Konakalla Venkataramam and Nanduri Venkata Subba Rao⁶, they wedded contemporary literature to dance as no one else earlier did.

From 1960 onwards, while all these experiments are favourably received, the one classically relevant outfit continued to be Venkatarama Natya Mandali, lately with Vedantam Satyanarayana heading it. After Vedantam Satyanarayana, the age of the yakshagana seemed almost extinct, though some of the youngsters still experiment with the form, sometimes with recognisable success.

This is the story of Kuchipudi and the Kuchipudi-born dance traditions. Meanwhile, each dance guru, who learnt Kuchipudi from great masters of yester years - C.R.Acharyulu, Nataraja Ramakrishna and others - found Kuchipudi's classical base a strong backing to experiment in diverse ways.

The story of Kuchipudi in the hundred years between 1860 and 1960 can be termed as the 'Natya period' of Kuchipudi, while after 1960 it can be called the 'Nritya period'. Many new experiments, rich in visual manifestations with less reliance on the textual content seem to be the order of the later days!

The story of Kuchipudi dance as it is recorded, really starts from the last quarter of the 19th C. Besides Chinta Venkataramaiah, the only other man we hear from this era is Vempati Venkata Narayana. By being mainly a Bhama-performer and also for the lack of information on him, he seems to be belonging to an earlier period, but the available material now projects him as the best dancer in the old classical model. On the other side, we have a contemporary of ours - Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma - as the best of the old Kuchipudi flavour in the new era. This book is concerned with the Kuchipudi dance history in between the period of these stalwarts and traces the lives of about thirty important dancer-actors mainly from Kuchipudi and the first generation of 'outsiders', who, in their own way, made Kuchipudi popular. This is only an act of gratitude for those who suffered so that Kuchipudi lived on.

References

1. Prof. V. Subramaniam, "Gender Monopolies in Indian Classical Dance: A Sociological Analysis of Cause and Context," *Sangeet Natak*, Nos.117-118 (July-December), 1995. p.4.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., p.7.
4. *Melam* is a performance group and is applied to all performing groups including those of the devadasis. "Vari" in "Lepakshi vaari Melam" is an adjectival adjunct which means "belonging to." The whole phrase means "a performing group belonging to Lepakshi."
5. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's manuscript copy of Bhama kalapam, which also includes some *sabdams* and *padams*, written in his own hand, contains explicatory notes on each one of the items. However, the *padams* included in the manuscript have *jatakam* of each provided by Shri Sastry. Copies of the manuscript written or dictated (for his son or for Kanchanamala respectively) by him are given to me by the beneficiaries. I thank Ms. Kanchanamala and Dr. Rajamani for allowing me to copy their original text.
6. The lyrical texts adopted by the Kuchipudi artists are varied and large. While Siddhendra and Bhagavatula Ramaiah were the mainstay of the early days, Narayana Teertha and Kshetrappa were the other vaggayakaras that found an honoured space in early performances. Laterday performances included lyrics by several song writers. While Annamayya is a recent find (though his *Laalipaata* was a favourite), other contemporary writers are also favoured. Balanthrapu Rajanikantha Rao, popularly called 'Rajani', whose *Satapatra Sundari* lyrics were favoured by early dancers Konakalla Venkataratnam, whose mellifluous songs with a rural idiom such as "Ravoyi Bangari Mama" and "Mokkajonna Thotalo", are also famous. Similarly the love lyrics of Nanduri Venkata Subba Rao, called "Yenki Paatalu" named after the village belle, Yenki and her paramour, Nayudu Bava found favour with the solo dancers.

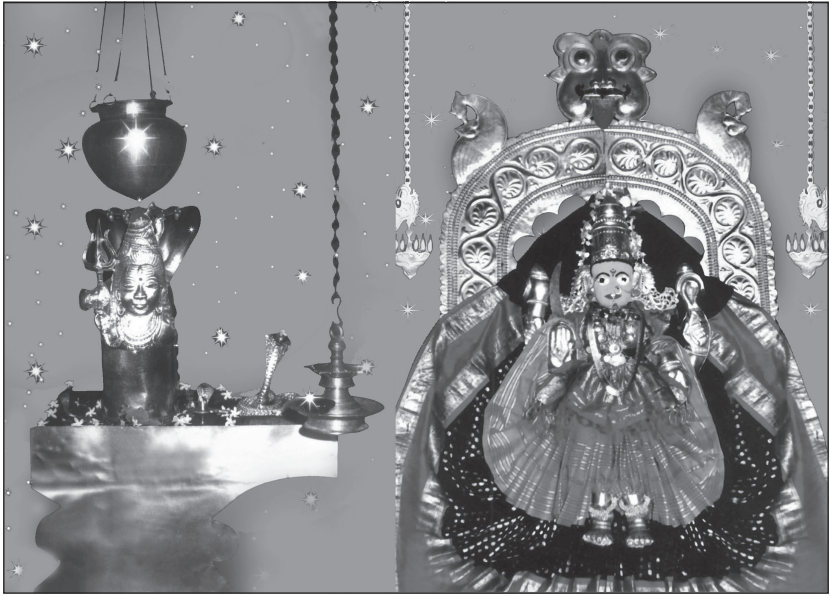
I

Kuchipudi : The Village and the Dance

Kuchipudi - The Village

*K*uchipudi village is situated on the Vijayawada - Machilipatnam road, 32 miles away from Vijayawada. It is in the midst of a culturally rich and vibrant area. Two miles away from it lies Srikakulam, the ancient capital of the Satavahana empire (271 B.C - 157 A.D). The deity in Srikakulam is Andhra Vishnu. Sri Krishna Deva Raya (1474 - 1530 A.D) of the Vijayanagara empire visited Srikakulam and worshipped the God there. Inspired by his visit, Krishna Deva Raya wrote his famous *prabandha* called *Amuktamalyada*¹. Five miles away from Kuchipudi lies Ghantasala, a famous Buddhist centre which thrived for 12 centuries, from 2nd century to 14th century. It was originally known as “Kantaka Saila”, a well-known port-town. Two miles away is Movva, the birth place of Kshetrappa², whose *padams* formed a major treasure of Telugu *sringara* literature. Thus *sangeeta*, *sahitya* and *nritya* are the very nerve centre of Kuchipudi.

The village is called “Bhagavathula Kuchipudi” since many Brahmin inhabitants have been professional artists, performing the Bhagavatha katha through dance, drama and music. Like many other performing family groups all over the country presenting the stories of Sri Krishna, the hero of the *Maha Bhagavatham*, through dance and music, Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu³ also made dance, music and singing the stories of Krishna their profession. As the custom goes, every Kuchipudi boy born in the village should be initiated into dance in his fifth year along with his *upanayanam*, and, at least once, dance in the presence of Lord Ramalingeswara and Goddess Bala Tripura Sundari⁴. Such an oath, unassailable



Ramalingeswara Swamy and Bala Tripurasundari at Kuchipudi

until the middle of the last century, was ordained by the founder of the art of Kuchipudi dance, believed to be Siddhendra Yogi.

That apart, several writers claimed that Kuchipudi was known by other names earlier. Some thought that the original name was “Kuchelapuri⁵”, claiming that Kuchela, Krishna’s boyhood friend, was from this village and the Bhagavatha katha was made popular because of his association. They also claim that Kuchela installed the idol of Ramalingeswara here.

Another name attributed to the village is “Kuseelavapuri⁷”. This suggestion came from no less a man than Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, who was closely associated with the revival of Kuchipudi art. On the analogy of ‘Melattur’, the village of the Bhagavatha mela in Thanjavur district (“Melattur” means the place of ‘melams’ - performing groups), Banda conjectured this, because “Kuseelava” means an actor and “Kuseelavapuri” would mean ‘a village of actors’.

None of these names stands for historical or even legendary

verification or oral history to vouchsafe for the claims. However, it is possible to believe that Kuchipudi must have been a satellite village of another big village nearby⁸. We have several instances of such a type in Andhra alone, for ‘kuchi’ means small and its bigger counterpart is “peda”, which means “big”. Near Kuchipudi of Krishna district there is “Pedapudi”, on the banks of the river Bheemavathi, a tributary of river Krishna. Since ‘Peda’ means big and ‘kuchi’ means small, the rich villagers of Pedapudi must have helped the Brahmin artists to settle down at Kuchipudi. Such analogies stand for reason and are valid even geographically and linguistically.

There is still another anomaly with regard to Kuchipudi of the Krishna district. Since the earliest reference to Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu appears in Mackenzie’s records, some people are of the strong opinion that Kuchipudi of Mackenzie’s records is a different Kuchipudi, for there are several villages in Andhra with the name of Kuchipudi and the Krishna district’s Kuchipudi has not been mentioned by its geographical connotations in the records.

Arudra, a well-known poet-critic, is of the opinion that the Kuchipudi as quoted in Mackenzie’s, is not the Divi seema Kuchipudi, but the one in Guntur district, near Vinukonda-Bellamkonda⁹. The already famous Brahmin Bhagavatulu who were permitted to perform before the then Vijayanagara king, Vira Narasimha Raya¹⁰, while performing the *kelika*, incorporated into it the episode of Sambeta Gurava Raju, a fief of the Vijayanagara empire, to show how cruel he was. This story is told in one of the local records recreated on the basis of oral history. Vira Narasimha Raya of the Tuluva family ruled the Vijayanagara empire from 1505 to 1509 and the Bhagavathulu were well-known performers even by them.

Arudra argues that these Bhagavathulu belonged to Kuchipudi near Tenali in Guntur district. He quoted a ‘Kaifiat’ referring to Raja Venkatadri Naidu in whose country lay this Kuchipudi, which was recorded as a ‘kasuba’ village (a big village) and contained a Ramalingeswara Swamy temple installed by

Parasurama Swamy. This village has local records since 1134 A.D. By the time the Kaifiyat was written (1812 December 12) one Pasumarthi Venkaiah was serving as a priest in the temple. Another Gopalaswamy temple was constructed in 1318 A.D. The 'Vedantam' family served it as its hereditary priests. According to Arudra, some of the families from Kuchipudi in Guntur district left for Kuchipudi in Krishna district and made it their home. Whatever may be the varacity of these different claims, the Kuchipudi of Krishna district has been the dwelling place of the Bhagavathulu, at least for the last five centuries.

As already mentioned, the first historical evidence regarding Kuchipudi comes from Mackenzie's "Machupalli Kaifiyat¹¹" according to which Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu were permitted to perform a "Keertana" in the royal court of king Vira Narasimha Rayalu (1505-1509).

Thus the earliest mention of Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu dates back to 1505, to the reign of Vira Narasimha Rayalu. If even by that time they are said to be well-known artists they must be practising their art at least since fifty years, which puts the date of the origin of Kuchipudi art to 1450 A.D.¹²

The second available mention of the existence and popularity of the Bhagavathulu was when the Golkonda Sultan, Abul Hasan Tanasha (1672-1685), had seen a performance of the Bhagavathulu around 1678 and was so pleased with it that he gifted the village as an *inam* through a *sanad* (a royal order of proclamation). Today the incident is often narrated by the villagers but there is no *sanad*. However, that the Sultan gave a *sanad* to this effect could be known from another reference, the Machilipatnam District record dated April 17, 1795, a clear hundred years after the issue of the *sanad*.

The Machilipatnam District records show an appeal by some of the villagers of Kuchipudi, when the occupancy of the lands in the village was questioned. The villagers appealed to the Revenue officials of the district that they were enjoying the income

from the lands through a *sanad* given to them by the Sultan and requested them to grant them the tenant rights. The collector asked them to show the *sanad*. However, further correspondence is not available from the existing government records.

The next historical evidence, crucial to trace the history of Kuchipudi, is found in an application submitted to the Revenue officials on March 1897, almost 100 years after the supplicants applied for the sanction of their rights. The application traces the history of Kuchipudi families claiming that the village was given under a “Sotriya dharma sasanam” to Bhagavathula Lingaiah, Vedantam Ramesam, Gopal, Peddibhotla Gurulingam with full rights by the Zamindars of Bezwada (now Vijayawada), Kalwakolanu Buchaiah Chowdari and E. Timmana Rao in the year 1744. The present applicants in 1897 were Bhagavathula Nagalingaiah, Kotaiah, Vedantam Mallesam and Bhagavathula Vasudevudu.

The letter also indicates that their ancestors applied for recognising their rights as lawful owners of the lands in Kuchipudi (letter written on 1795 April 15) and the then collector of Krishna district, D.W.Ragan, answered their letter on May 14, 1795 and asked them to submit the *sanad*. Though we do not know whether the application put in on March 19, 1897 was ever looked into or answered, this correspondence proves that there was a *sanad* which was in the possession of these families in 1795 and the *sanad* was issued to them by the Tanashah.

The evidences reveal that Kuchipudi and its Bhagavathulu were known to the world of arts in Andhra at least from 1505 and they must be practising their art at least half a century before that (i.e., 1450 approximately) and they were itinerant performing groups moving from place to place and giving performances, presenting the story of Bhagavatha, to thousands of rural people, spreading the spirit of godliness among them, while enjoying the lands given to them by the Tanasha.

Kuchipudi - the Dance

Though the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu were performing since 1505, we do not exactly know what constituted their performances. In the court of Vira Narasimha Rayalu, they requested for a “Kelika”. In the “Keertana” they performed they showed the story of Sambeta Gurava Raju, one artist playing the role of Raju, two as women and one as the servant. The connotations of the words ‘Kelika’ and ‘Keertana’ are now lost to us, but not difficult to understand. “Kelika” is a general term for any entertainment or amusement and “Keertana”, as the term indicates, is a song and dance eulogizing the *leelas* of gods. Since it gave enough scope for improvising the altogether unconnected story of Gurava Raju, the format could have been flexible. It could be an earlier version of their Bhagavatha narration, more in the form of song, some dance and some impersonation. It could not be, as Arudra conjectured, a Golla Kalapam performance, for the theme, the mood and the philosophical discussions will not let a mundane story like Gurava Raju’s to intervene. Perhaps, as some others suggested, they might have performed a “Pagativesham”, since an alien story could have been easily incorporated into it, for Pagati Vesham is an open-ended, non-text-based presentation. P.S.R. Appa Rao¹³ suggests that the Keertana must have been Bhama kalapam itself because it might be called a Bhagavatha story and so a “Keertana” and secondly, since Siddhendra Yogi founded the art form, the Bhagavathulu must have performed that only. Even this does not seem valid since, as in the case of a philosophical text like Golla kalapam, they could not have incorporated a *bhibhatsa* story of Gurava Raju, in a sensitive and erotic-centred theme of Bhama kalapam. One should think that the Keertana format must have been an earlier version practised by the Bhagavathulu before they were initiated into a serious dance-drama format of a kalapam, and must have contained songs and dance praising the Lord’s several *leelas*, disjointed stories of the exploits of the Lord.

Presently, we have evidences of Bhama Kalapam’s

presentations only from the mid-18th century onwards. Though the origins and authorship of Bhama Kalapam are lost to us, oral histories and local legends attribute the text to Siddhendra Yogi. Though, again, local histories are varied on the life of Siddhendra Yogi, Bhama kalapam seems to be the mainstay of Kuchipudi performers since the last few centuries they have been practising dance. According to popular belief, Siddhendra Yogi, finding the village boys amenable to song and dance, agreed to teach them, provided the village elders promised him that every Brahmin boy would be initiated into dance at the proper age and would dance at least once in the presence of the village deities. Adherence to a promise given by a village community to its benefactor, perpetuating his memory, learning an art and performing it are very commendable and noble acts. Siddhendra Yogi gave the community a profession, on the same lines as they were practising and in the same way as the rural people have been engaged hereditarily in their professions and crafts for long.

Bhama kalapam and Golla kalapam



Bhama kalapam : Mahankali Sri Ramulu as Krishna, Satyanarayana Sarma as Bhama and Darbha Venkateswarlu as Madhavi

It is believed that Siddhendra Yogi was the author of two *Kalapams* - the Bhama kalapam and the Golla kalapam¹⁴. Since we do not have any of the texts authoritatively to be named after the purported author, this

proposition seems to be valid if we look at the performance traditions. We have indications of this from later authors whose reminiscences of early performances seem to be dependable.

According to these, Golla kalapam preceded the performance of Bhama kalapam. A Golla bhama comes to the village square to sell milk and butter milk and confronts a Brahmin who refuses to buy milk from a milk maid because of her lower birth. The shepherdess argued with the Brahmin, quoting scriptures regarding man's birth. "All people are born equal", she declares. The Brahmin continues to be adamant to concede and argues in favour of the existing caste system. She then chastises him and traces the history of the evolution of the universe and the role of various castes in it. "A man belongs to a caste if he fulfils the obligations it prescribes, but not by mere birth." During the course of the discourse, she narrates the story of 'Samudra Mathanam' to prove how the Lord saved the world from demonism. She also traces the evolution of man from the stage of a woman conceiving a child to its birth.

Scholars often find Golla kalapam as an example of social protest at a time when casteism ruled the roost in the land. Similar Golla kalapam stories are prominent both in the devadasi tradition and the Toorpu Bhagavatham tradition. The devadasi-s of east and west Godavari districts perform the text of Tarigonda Vengamamba. In Toorpu Bhagavatham, many texts exist and they depend on the nativity of the troupe, the patron and the poet. The earlier part of the Golla kalapam, tracing the evolution of the universe is seminal as a prelude to Bhama kalapam. We have strong local voices from Kuchipudi which say that a part of it was written by Bhagavathula Ramaiah, a Kuchipudi-born poet-philosopher. Whether this inclusion of Golla kalapam in their repertoire was due to the influence of the Toorpu Bhagavatham texts or the devadasi performances, or *vice versa*, we cannot ascertain. It is possible that the Toorpu Bhagavatham troupes with a non-Brahminical background must have put forward a plea that the mere birth of a person into a caste would not entitle him to special privileges. There is no proof either way, but the earlier performance tradition of a Golla kalapam preceding Bhama kalapam was stopped even with the best of the performers. They performed both the kalapams separately.



Satyanarayana Sarma as Golla bhama

Many scholars argue that a Golla kalapam performance before Bhama kalapam is untenable, as both of them belong to two separate genres - one, a philosophical one and the second a romantic one. They also argue that there is no continuity either in the story or in characters.

Performance reviews or performances as recollected by laterday writers suggest that a Bhama kalapam performance started with a short prelude of Golla kalapam. Golla bhama comes selling milk and confronts an adamant Brahmin proud of his birth when the Golla bhama narrates two stories : one, how the universe came into existence and two, the process of the birth of a human being. Both are related to the fundamental philosophical and biological origins of man. But many scholars and dance practitioners of today reject the proposition of a Golla kalapam performance preceding a Bhama kalapam performance. This rejection seems to have been based on considerations other than the performance modalities *per se*.

Looking at the basic tenets of Golla kalapam and its performance prior to that of Bhama kalapam, one should go back to the literary and performance conventions prevalent in the 16th and 17th centuries. Poets invariably started their stories with the beginning of the universe and how the Godhood came into existence. This prelude was needed, perhaps, to put the ensuing story in its proper perspective. While Bhama kalapam is a

“localized” story with a “contextualised theme” of the Lord and his consort, the Golla kalapam speaks of the origins of the universe, narrating the story of ‘Samudra Mathanam’, relates the origins of the universe and the story of saving it from the *rakshasas* by Lord Sri Krishna to suggest, as he does in the latter kalapam, how Satyabhama mistakes the Lord of the universe as her own and should belong to her and to no one else.

The second reason based on performance conventions would seem more meaningful in such an arrangement. Looking at the two kalapams intrinsically, one will not fail to notice that one kalapam is obverse to the other ; that is to say that they are two sides of the same coin.

There are two major characters in Bhama kalapam : Satyabhama and Madhavi, her confidante. There are two characters in Golla kalapam : Golla bhama and the Brahmin. If Siddhendra Yogi was the author of both the kalapams (which I believe true), he had evidently an ironic dig at the superficial, adamant, self-imposing people in the society, who reject to listen to reason and always try to assert their superiority. In argument after argument the Brahmin sees his beliefs are being persecuted, rejected and laughed at, but he would not budge an inch about his superiority. Untenable arrogance is as much of human nature as selfish indulgence. Both the Brahmin and Satyabhama cannot see beyond their own captive selves. It is to work out this uncompromising attitude which blinds human reason is what both the kalapams are concerned with. A short prelude showing dissimilarities in human temperament is what Golla kalapam aims at, and dissimilarities between what one believes and the real truth is what Bhama kalapam dramatises. Both are in-depth studies of human predicament and human frailties. One is woven in a philosophical garb ; the other in a romantic one.

This also leads us to understand Siddhendra Yogi’s deeper concerns about how people are entrenched in mistaking appearance as reality. What Satyabhama believes in is only a spec of what

reality is. She demands that Sri Krishna must be hers, searches for him, entreats Madhavi to bring him back by hook or crook, without even once questioning herself as to the reasons for Krishna going away. So is the case with the Brahmin who takes pride in being born so, but without knowing the intrinsic meaning of what it means to be a real 'brahmin' !

This ironic contrast between appearance and reality is prominently portrayed in both the kalapams. Both the Brahmin and the Bhama are superior to Golla Bhama and Madhavi respectively, at least in worldly estimate : the latter two are socially at a lower order, as per the worldly canons. But both of them are superior intellectually and can assess things objectively.

The two plays also show a great depth of understanding in their structural contrast. While Golla kalapam starts with the birth of the universe and the oneness of human kind, it ultimately leads to say that mere birth does not bestow supremacy. In Golla kalapam, it is from the universal to the individual and in Bhama kalapam, it is the other way round : it is from the individual to the universal. The moment Satyabhama realizes that the impediment in not being able to unite with her lord is her external, earthly acquisitions, she divests herself of the riches and then only she can be one with the Lord !

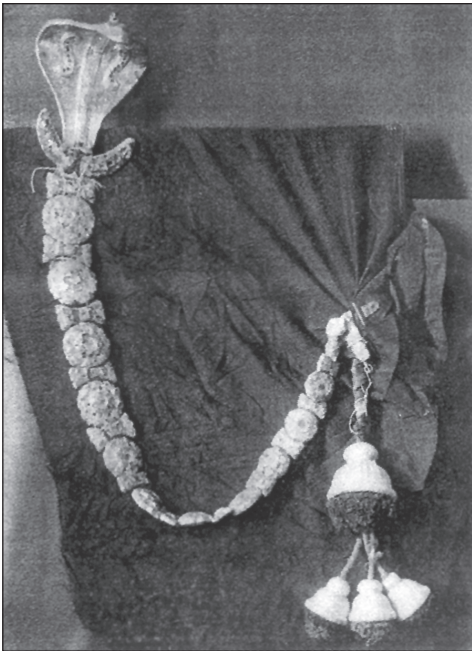
These two kalapams - the best assets of our dance literature - are complementary to each other to make us understand the truth of the art as envisaged in ancient days to reach god through art. To sum up, the two kalapams are perfect examples to show that our scriptures are poems with a philosophical content and our literature a spiritual treatise with a romantic content! This is more true of the treasures Kuchipudi offered us for the last five hundred years.

In course of time, however, Golla kalapam got separated from Bhama kalapam and was made into a separate performance unit. But Golla kalapam could not fill in as an all-night performance. And so later writers incorporated a love story into it. Sunkari Kondadu, a tax collector, makes love to Gollabhama.

Hilarious duets and even obscene dialogues and songs with double meaning crept in. This, however, did not go that far in Kuchipudi as in folk art performances such as the puppet show and some versions of Toorpu Bhagavatham. But the clinching point in both the Kuchipudi and the folk art variations is that Sunkari Kondadu was none other than Sri Krishna himself who came in that guise to test Golla bhama!

Bhama kalapam was, in course of time, made into a three-night performance. The reasons are obvious : when an able performer becomes popular, the ‘Melam’ wants to encash his popularity. They stretched the kalapam into larger proportions by adding several individual items, which hitherto were only used in training the dancers. Bhama does not appear on the stage during the first night ; only her plait appears on the curtain and Bhama from behind the curtain has a long story to narrate, which is called the “Veni vrittantam”.

“Veni Vrittantam” or “Jada Bharatam”



During the first night’s performance of Bhama kalapam, in a three-night schedule, the Bhama actor does not appear on the stage. Only her long, black plait does. Satyabhama is adorned with a long plait (jada), which is the very epitome of her beauty and pride. She throws the plait on the curtain, as a mark of supremacy. The Bhama actor also feels that the plait is an indication of his supremacy over other

Bhama actors. If anyone competes and excels him, the competitor would cut the plait as his prize. This, the Kuchipudi people say, has been in vogue ever since there was bitter competition among Bhama - actors¹⁵.

Today such a competition is perhaps untenable, but still as a preliminary gesture of challenging competitors, the plait is still thrown on the curtain or at least held high in hand to express Bhama's beauty and pride. The story starting with Bhama feeling proud of her plait is symptomatic of the entire Bhama kalapam for external beauty and unfounded pride are the prime reasons for Satyabhama's problems in the play.

The "Veni (plait) Vrittantam (story)" does not stop with praising that the plait is beautiful and so pride-worthy. Its antecedents, as described by Satyabhama, bespeak its uniqueness as an ornament. Viswakarma, the god of the material world, after meditating on Siva for a long time, received a boon that he could create the most beautiful of ornaments. Viswakarma made it for Mohini when Vishnu turned into a lady to distribute *amrutham* at the time of *Samudra Mathanam*. It was later adorned by goddess Saraswathi and later by Parvati when she was dancing with Lord Siva in the *arthanareeswara nrityam*. Several celestial women wore it before Sri Krishna gave it to Satyabhama.

The plait by itself is said to represent the world in all its manifestations of beauty. Adishesha is placed at the apex of the plait. Below the Lord Adishesha are the Sun and the Moon and below the two, the 27 stars. The end tassels have three round balls representing the three worlds and to each of the three hang three smaller balls (totally nine) which represent the navarasas. The plait is thus a symbolic representation of feminine life with all its variety and beauty. Even in everyday life, the Telugu people think that the plait is a symbol of womanhood and a mark of beauty.

When Bhama upholds the importance of the plait, it is partly the feminine pride that she upholds and the beauty of the plait as a fair appendage of a lady's unique magnanimity which

signifies her pride. That the pride is the Bhama's as well as the Bhama - actor's is Siddhendra Yogi's double-edged comment on both Satyabhama and the unrivalled Bhama-actor of Kuchipudi.

The second night's performance starts with Satyabhama's entry with her "Pravesa daruvu" - the entry song - and ends with Satyabhama sending Madhavi to fetch Sri Krishna. The third night's performance commences with Sri Krishna's entry - not alone, but with either Rukmini or Radha and a "Savatula Kayyam" (a quarrel between two co-wives) ensues. Finally, Sri Krishna pacifies both and there is a 'mangalam'.

Bhama kalapam tests the capabilities of an artist. With only three characters - Satyabhama, her confidante Madhavi and Sri Krishna - the kalapam has been a tremendous success on the stage, provided it is performed by versatile dancers. Its greatest asset is the immense scope it offers for *sattvikabhinaya*, through which the dancer can show the diverse emotive expressions of the *ashta-vidha-nayikas* (the mental and psychological conditions of the eight types of heroines) during one single play. While the kalapam opens vast scope for *sringarabhinaya*, it also manifests other rasas like *karuna* and *hasya*.

The role of Madhavi is variously interpreted. She acts as a confidante of Satyabhama who shares all her agony with her. She interprets the words and songs of Bhama in such a way that she alludes to contemporary situations, which makes Bhama angry. She uses double - edged words, innuendos, sarcasm and irony to illustrate or refute a point. She is a complex character with opposite characteristics housed in her. She is a female confidante, but in male dress. She is sarcastic, but sympathetic ; she is friendly, but also a critic of Bhama whom she does not spare. The same actor becomes 'Madhava' when Krishna arrives on the scene. Since Madhavi acts as a woman in Satya's scenes and a man in Krishna's scenes, some over-indulgent dancers showed the character as a eunuch, which idea is repulsive !

Pagati vesham



Traditional Kuchipudi actors in a 'Budabukkala' vesham

Besides the kalapams, the Kuchipudi actors also performed Pagati veshams, either as a full time vocation or a part-time one. Pagati vesham is a daytime performance. 'Vesham' means to put on costume and make-up of another person and behave as another person, i.e., impersonation. Often it is a group impersonation, depicting the life of a particular community with all its characteristics and idiosyncrasies. The best part of a pagati vesham is to catch those special qualities that reflect the general nature of a community and the idiosyncracies that mirror its oddities. Several communities much earlier than the Kuchipudi people made it their profession. The Gaddipadu Bhagavathulu and the Jangams were famous even by the time Kuchipudi adopted it.

The selection of incidents in a pagati vesham is very crucial. A non-committed treatment adds to its hilarity. There is no bar for the artists to choose any community and put it to a test, non-committal and objective in theme and a subtle irony in presentation. A budabukkala, who awakens the villagers with his songs and indulges in foretelling the future ; a satani, with pronouncedly big marks of *namam* on the forehead, on the arms and on his stomach

is an avowed womanizer while talking all the time about scruples and recounts God's name.

There are 36 such pagati veshams the Kuchipudi people perform. In between the comic characterizations, there are veshams like "Sarada" and Arthanareeshwara" which are mythological. On the last day, they perform the Sarada vesham and go to each house for alms! Pagati vesham arriving at a village has been a welcome event. They perform one vesham a day. Usually a smaller group of three or four is sufficient to enact any vesham. These veshams, while reflecting a community's popular characteristics are always entertaining ; so entertaining that even the community people criticised in it enjoy the characterization.

The reasons for the Kuchipudi artists to choose Pagati vesham are numerous. Enjoying the performance of a new form of entertainment is one. But the second reason is more important. It offered an opening for the less engaged artists of the village. For five to six decades many young men less talented (than the Bhama-veshagadu) and artists who did not have much work went into Pagati veshalu and made a mark. The reasons for its slow decline and ultimate extinction is partly because the "classical artists" (so they thought) of Kuchipudi found it below their dignity to go to each house and beg for alms! (That was what they were doing for five centuries. Not only they. All village entertainers did the same). Secondly, the contemporary musical theatre offered these artists some important parts in the plays. Many Kuchipudi artists earned fame even as stage actors!

However, one should admit that pagati vesham is a real difficult vocation. Creating an illusion of reality during daytime is much more difficult than creating such an illusion during the night.

Yakshaganam

There has been constant search for newness among Kuchipudi artists either to better their existing performance opportunities or to innovate or adopt new art forms to fulfil their creative and financial urges. This is evident from their compulsive



A scene from *Prahlada yakshaganam*

choice of Yakshaganam¹⁶ as a means of their expanding repertoire. With less narrative and descriptive elements and more dramatization, with several characters taking a story to its climactic conclusion, the yakshagana, brought to Kuchipudi by Chinta Venkataramaiah and Hari Madhavayya, was an instantaneous success. Taking stories from mythology and choosing themes that had already become stunning successes on the theatrical stage, Kuchipudi yakshaganam was different from all those models, since it concentrated more on dance movements, rhythmic *jati* variations, powerful and scintillating *daruvus* and strong character portrayals.

Yakshaganam's major emphasis is on group activity, which is new to Kuchipudi. Kalapam is usually a one-man's performance, at best two. There is not much of physical movement in kalapam, whereas active stage movements are central to yakshaganam. Several actor-dancers work together to make yakshaganam a pleasing *drisya-kavya*. If Bhamā kalapam offers an in-depth

experience of emotions, yakshaganam presents a broad array of emotions. Soon, there arose many *melams* (troupes) performing yakshaganas, the most important ones being the Chinta, Vedantam, Mahankali and Bhagavathula.

The making of a Kuchipudi yakshagana is a subject for further research. Venkataramaiah chose a popular play already well-known in the musical theatre of the day. The team members supplied or wrote *daruvus* appropriate to the varying occasions. *Sandhi vachanas* and dialogues were added. Occasional metrical stanzas also found their place. Invariably, *pravesa daruvus* which are absent from stage plays have a strong presence in yakshaganas. That is to say, the Kuchipudi team took a skeleton of a play (either popular as a stage play or printed and available as a literary work) and wrote a “dance-play” (like a screen-play) for their purposes. Then the songs were set to music, usually by one or the entire team.

The yakshaganas made two types of noteworthy contributions to the development of Kuchipudi art. For the first time new plays were being composed and set to music and a thought - process started which provoked the artists to struggle for propriety - both in presenting the various sequences and also in character portrayals. This naturally resulted in different kinds of artists specializing in different roles. Secondly, the more or less rigid format of a sringara-oriented play or a philosophical - centred play was replaced with short episodes of varying emotions, which in later years led to further relaxation of rigid formulations and eventually to newer, shorter forms of expression.

But within fifty years the glamour and the popularity of yakshaganas started diminishing. The reasons are not far to seek. Kuchipudi’s weaknesses and the main-stream theatre’s strengths caused a dent in the popularity of the yakshaganas. There were patrons of the old time for kalapams also. But since the bhama-actor is also the heroine of the yakshaganas, performances became stale by showcasing the same people in similar roles again and

again. The popularity of the best bhama - performers like Vedantam Raghavaiah remained in tact, for such a talent was not easy to get. There was also another reason for the diminishing popularity of the yakshaganas. The teams could not produce new dance-dramas on the lines of *Prahlada* and *Usha parinayam*. Further, all the *melams* were not of the same calibre. This was a typical professional theatre's attitude. Also because there was a change in the audience's reception. In the main-stream theatre the prose play started gaining importance by 1940 which the Kuchipudi people did not want to imitate.

Very slowly there was a perceptible change in the attitude of the actors also. Some of the youngsters exposed to outside world had seen or at least heard of the new trends in dance due to a resurgence in the aftermath of the renaissance. Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal and their methods of dance presentation influenced youngsters. At the same time, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, who was adept in the Bhama *vesham*, started teaching youngsters who were not Kuchipudi-born. He had a flair for independent solo items. He realized that the changing circumstances necessitated a change in the dance format also. At the first instance he started teaching youngsters the individual items that already existed in the kalapams and yakshaganas. An innovator with a great creative mind, Vedantam started with *padams* and *javalis*, *slokas* and *sabdams* suitable for solo dances. He also rearranged classical items such as *ashtapadis* and *tarangams* in a way that they could cast one or two dancers.

Solo dances

For over twenty five years whoever had joined the 'garidi' of Chinta Venkataramaiah for yakshagana training also had instruction from Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, finding that his method of teaching the *sanchari-s* as value-added interpretations of a word or a cluster of words or images which enhanced the variety and strength of the solos. He first shared them with the first crop of young dancers like Vedantam Raghavaiah, but



Vedantam Raghavaiah in
a solo dance sequence

specifically worked on them with Ayyanki Tandava Krishna and his own son, Jagannadha Sarma. He added solos and also two-men sequences and toured extensively. The idea had spread like wild fire and girls from cultured and liberal - minded families started learning dance from him.

Thus a new dance emerged. Several non-Kuchipudi people joined him to learn the new variations and thus this dance with an emphasis on *mukhjabhinaya* and *hastabhinaya* as creative tools of expressing

intricate *bhavas*, has slowly taken the place of group performances.

Meanwhile some of the enterprising Kuchipudi artists got opportunities in the movie field. With expanding horizons people from other towns wanted to learn Kuchipudi - and so there were migrations to city centres and regional towns. One of the Kuchipudi aspirants, Vempati Chinna Satyam pursued a different course. He started a school in Madras and had chartered for himself a new path with new goals.

Dance Ballets (Nriya Natikas)

Very slowly a number of solo items outside the classical repertoire became part of solo performances. As the girl students increased, choreographing new items became necessary. It was at

this time the Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi, after it tasted great success when a team led by Chinta Krishna Murthy and Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao gave performances in Tamil Nadu, requested Chinta's Venkatarama Natya Mandali to produce *Ksheera Sagara Mathanam*, a new dance drama to be directed by Vempati Chinna Satyam. As it was a great hit, Satyam concentrated on producing *nritya natikas* which took the world of dance by storm.

This short summary shows that on several occasions Kuchipudi has to adopt newer forms of creative expression. Creative arts have a compulsive need to change according to social needs and changing patterns in society. Since dance has gone global, even global trends tend to change the nature and function of dance. We have new choreographies, modern dance experiments, diaspora trials - all leading to widening the horizons of the art form.

Changes in themes, in the format, in design and in using the idiom with lots of interaction with other forms of



A scene from *Kalyana Rukmini* choreographed by Vempati Chinna Satyam

communication might transform Kuchipudi further. A dance which was once monolithic, and traditional, and a strict adherent to classical principles has now found itself freer both in form and content choices. While change is welcome artists must not allow the basic Kuchipudi format to be disturbed. In such an eventuality only the village remains and not the dance !

References

1. *Amukthamalyada* is a poetic work written by the Vijayanagara king, Sri Krishna Deva Raya (1509-1529). It belongs to a poetic category called the "prabandha", a narrative with a story, but with ornate language and profuse descriptions. It contains the story of Goda Devi, a flower girl and her devotion to and love for God Mannaruswamy.
2. Kshetrayya (1600-1660), a native of Movva in Krishna district whose *sringara* and *bhakthi padams* (love and devotional lyrics), dedicated to Lord Muvva Gopala are known for their intense erotical fervour written in simple, native poetic diction and tilting rhythm, intended for dance. The *padams* form the major part of the repertoire of the Telugu and Tamil devadasis of Vaishnava temples.
3. 'Bhagavatulu' refers to those who propagate the 'Bhagavata' story through music, dance and narration.
4. The deities at Kuchipudi - Lord Ramalingeswara and Goddess Bala Tripura Sundari. It is in honour of the Goddess that the invocation song "Amba Paraku" is sung before every Kuchipudi performance.
5. Mikkilineni Radhakrishna Murty, *Andhra Nataka Ranga Charitra*, p.135.
6. Kuseelavapuri : The name was suggested by Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, "Kuchipudi Natya Kala," *Natyakala*, October, 1966.
7. "Kuchi" and "Peda" or "Pedda" : 'Kuchi' or 'Chinna' and 'Pedda' are terms used for 'small' and 'big' respectively. We have evidences to show that wherever a 'Kuchi' village is seen there is a neighbouring 'Pedda' village.
8. Col. Collin Mackenzie (1754-1821) worked in the Engineering Dept. of the East India Company, worked at different places in Andhra, got

interested in local histories and later, worked as Surveyor General of the Madras Presidency. With the help of native scholars, he collected local histories of several villages of Andhra. Each collected narrative is a “kavile” or “kaifiyat” and they are local village histories.

9. Arudra, *Samagra Andhra Sahityam*, II vol., 2nd Ed. Hyderabad : Telugu Academy, 2007. pp. 755-756.
10. Veera Narasimha Rayalu (1503-1509) : Sri Krishna Deva Raya’s cousin who ruled the Vijayanagara empire for a short time.
11. Machupalli Kaifiyat : See for details, “The Kaifiyat of Machupalli local records, ” No.56, pp. 56 ff. *Studies in the History of the Third Dynasty of Vijayanagara* by Dr. N. Venkataramanayya, pp. 462-463.
12. ‘Keertana’ : any song in praise of a deity. ‘Kelika’ : an entertainment; a play. ‘Keertana’ is a generic term, whereas ‘kelika’ is a specific term denoting a particular type of a piece in a performance.
13. Agreeing that the earliest available mention of Kuchipudi Bhagavatulu was in Machupalli Kaifiyat, P.S.R. Appa Rao says that they must have been practising the art at least for 100 years by then and so places the art’s origins to 1400 A.D. Sista Ramakrishna Sastry, however, feels that to gain a reputation of being renowned artists, it could have been sufficient to be practising the art for not more than 50 years. And so, places the origin at 1450 A.D. This is a matter of opinion. See Appa Rao’s article on Siddhendra Yogi, *Bharati*, April, 1960.
14. Arudra, op. cit., p. 756.
15. “Jada Bharatam,” by C. Kapaleswara Rao, *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Bombay : Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, 1996. pp. 82-83.
16. For a detailed history of the yakshagana, see S.V. Joga Rao, *Andhra Yakshagana Vangmaya Charitra*. Waltair : Andhra University, 1956.

II

Early Formulations : Two Legendary Predecessors

Siddhendra Yogi

The story of Siddhendra Yogi, the architect of Kuchipudi dance has been couched in legends and myths, very often contradicting each other. There are as many variations in the story as there are story tellers. Similarly, to which century or age he belonged to has always been a question of controversy. In the same way, the basic things about his seminal work are drowned in conjectures.

The first important document about Kuchipudi and its Bhagavathulu is the “Machupalli kaifiat” as already mentioned. This document of oral history, however, does not mention about Siddhendra Yogi or his *magnum opus*, the Bhama kalapam. In no other historical document his name is mentioned. However, based on the traditional hereditary lore of Kuchipudi one tends to accept the premise that Siddhendra Yogi was the originator of the dance tradition in Kuchipudi and his Bhama kalapam has been the main stay of their dance.

The story of Siddhendra’s (or Siddaiah’s) life in Kuchipudi itself has several variations¹. The one legend that is circulated in the village tells us that during his childhood and early youth Siddaiah moved around as a vagabond, without any education. He had some connection with some drama troupes in the neighbourhood. Some householder, taking pity on him, got his daughter married to him. But there were constant rebukes in and outside the house as to why a worthless uneducated brute like Siddaiah could be married into an honest man’s household. Incensed with the insults, Siddaiah left the village, roamed about



An artist's imaginary portrait of Siddhendra Yogi

several places, until he received the grace of a saint, who gave him a 'mantra' to be meditated upon. Through the mantra, Siddaiah became a *pundit*, a man with expertise in all the *sastras* including dance and music. He wanted to return to his village. He reached the banks of Krishna and he had to cross the river to reach his home. His homecoming was welcomed by his in-laws who fixed up a date for uniting the wife and the husband. Siddaiah started to cross the river which was even by then in spate. But Siddaiah persisted on crossing the river to meet his wife. But when he reached the midst of the river, he couldn't swim any more. He was sure he was going to be drowned and before his death, he took "aatura sanyasa" ('sanyasa' in expediency). Meanwhile a big wave

in the tumultuous river threw him on to the shores. He went to his in-law's place unmindful of what had happened in the midst of the river. That first night when his wife met him alone for the first time, she could only see a 'sanyasi' in him. Siddaiah remembered his plight the previous night and requested his wife and her parents to allow him to lead the life of a sanyasi. They agreed to do so and Siddaiah became Siddhendra Yogi.

Perhaps his early escapades in theatre continued even in Siddaiah's yogic life. And one day when he was in meditation he was asked by Lord Krishna to write the story of Parijatha-apaharanam as a dance play and get it enacted by the young boys of Kuchipudi.

The same story of how Siddaiah became Siddhendra Yogi was also told in the case of Narayana Tirtha², whose *Krishna Leela Tarangini* had also initiated a musical dance - drama tradition in the South, leading to conjectures that Narayana Tirtha and Siddhendra Yogi were not two persons but only one.

Another story that got circulated traditionally in Kuchipudi is that Siddaiah was a disciple of Narayana Tirtha, a blind seer, and used to serve him faithfully. One day when Narayana Tirtha was singing his *tarangams* in praise of Lord Krishna, lying on his bed, child Krishna started dancing on his chest. It went on for a long time and inquisitive Siddaiah asked his guru whether it was not paining when young Krishna danced for a long time. The guru was aghast and asked Siddaiah that, if he were to see Him again, he should enquire from Krishna when he and his Guru would be relieved of these mortal births and attain *moksha*. Siddaiah asked Krishna the same question when he appeared the next day. Sri Krishna answered that Narayana Tirtha would attain *moksha* only in his next birth and as far as Siddaiah was concerned, he would attain *moksha* in this birth itself if only he would write the *Parijathapaharana* story in a dance-drama format, teach it to dancers who would propagate the faith by presenting the *Sringara prabandha*. Siddappa wrote the *prabandha* and was in search of proper dancers. He saw young Brahmin boys on the outskirts of

Kuchipudi and enquired who they were. He met the parents of the boys and told them his purpose of visiting them. He entreated them that god himself willed it so and wished that his “Krishna Katha” be performed by successive generations of the village youngsters. He insisted on two conditions - this dance should be taught only to boys and the parents should take an oath that every Brahmin boy born in the village should start learning dance in his fifth year and after completion, must at least once perform in the local Ramalingeswara Swamy temple. The elders accepted the two conditions and thus started the performance history of Bhama kalapam.

Many similar stories about Siddhendra Yogi and his encounter with the Kuchipudi boys are in vogue with a few changes regarding details. But there is one story which is completely different from all the others and makes an interesting reading. Published in *Golconda Patrika* (daily) dated Sept. 9, 1942, a “Kalabhimani” writes a note on “Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu : Puttu Poorvotharamulu³” (Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu : their origin and antecedents”). The column runs as follows :

“Siddhendra Yogi, who was responsible for the birth of the Kuchipudi art, was a great soul. He was a master of Bharata Sastra. He wrote ‘*Parijathapaharanam*’ which had been considered to be the first of the yakshaganas [sic]. He desired that his work should be performed. He was searching for Brahmin boys who could speak the language meticulously and also dance. He went round and round in search of such boys, met Brahmin elders and expressed his desire. But all of them rejected the idea because dance was looked down upon and dancers were considered ‘untouchables’.

“Until that time dramas were written and performed only in Sanskrit and plays in Telugu did not exist. People laughed at his idea of producing a play in Telugu. They would mock at him and laugh it away. Siddhendra, in his tour, came to Kuchipudi in Krishna district and after a long walk, he wanted to rest for a while under a tree on the bank of the village tank.

“There was a Vedantam family in the village ; a pious Brahmin family engaged itself dutifully in religious rituals. However, in the family of three Vedantam brothers, no child survived and the family was struck with grief. The head of the family, Vedantam Someswara Somayajulu, who came to know of a saint’s arrival to the outskirts of the village met him with his brothers, narrated to him their grief-ridden story and requested the yogi to protect the progeny. Siddhendra Yogi came to know their plight. He assured the brothers that all the three would soon have sons and they would survive. But he wanted them to take an oath that they would be taught, along with their professional education, dance, music and literature and ultimately the three boys must undertake to perform his work, *Parijathapaharanam*, hereditarily, ever after. The grief-stricken brothers gladly accepted the condition. Siddhendra went away, reminding the brothers that they should honour their oath and assured them that he would come back at the appropriate time to train the boys in dance and music.

“The three brothers had, in course of time, had three sons. When they attained the age of five, the fathers wanted to celebrate the *upanayanam*, the initiation ceremony. Siddhendra appeared in their dreams and reminded them of their promise. Meanwhile the ruler of the land, “Venkatadri Prabhuvu” heard about Siddhendra Yogi’s saintly life and his prowess in yoga, met him and urged him to come to his *asthanam* and bless the land and the people. Siddhendra obliged and told him that in a few days a group of young performers from Kuchipudi, a village under his rule, would perform Krishna’s story of *Parijathapaharanam* and he should see that the tradition continued and successive generations of performers would be engaged in propagating this story of *bhakti*. The king gladly agreed to do so.

“The three young boys were thoroughly trained by Siddhendra Yogi, who arrived at the village at a time when their professional education was in an advanced stage. The play was performed in the temple of Ramalingeswara. King Venkatadri not

only witnessed the play in awe, but in the final scene when Sri Krishna came to Satyabhama's place to bless her, the king had a feeling that the actor playing Sri Krishna was god Krishna himself. He honoured the boys for their performance and the actor who played the role of Sri Krishna was presented with a shawl. That night the king had a dream in which Lord Krishna appeared with the shawl presented by him to the actor.

“Next morning king Venkatadri saw Siddhendra Yogi and prostrated before him. “I was honoured, Saint. Lord Krishna gave me *darshan*. Please order me to do anything and I will oblige”, said the king. Siddhendra Yogi said that in order to propagate bhakti through art, these families must be given enough facilities. The king then gave them the Kuchipudi village and asked them to enjoy the revenue and perpetuate the art. ‘Let every boy born here be initiated into dance and continue to perform the play was the blessing of Siddhendra Yogi and the wish of king Venkatadri.”

This story looks more plausible than the others, but equally undependable. The author of the column, an unsigned “Kalabhimani “ does not say where from he gets the story. One thing is certain that this story doesn't form a part of the several legendary stories within the village that talk about Siddhendra Yogi.

All these stories, well intended, lacked any evidence except the Machupalli kaifiyat. First of all, if we accept that Siddhendra was a disciple of Narayana Tirtha (1580 - 1680), Siddhendra would belong to 17th century. If we go by king Venkatadri's story, it would be late 16th and early 17th centuries. If we relate Siddhendra Yogi with Veera Narasimha Raya story and accept that the ‘kelika’ performed by the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu was Bhama kalapam itself, it would also seem untenable because in such a highly romantic bhakti story to bring in a *bhibhatsa* story of Sambeta Gurava Raju would be, to say the least, incongruous.

Under these circumstances, it is safe to place the origins of Kuchipudi and Siddhendra's times to 15th century. The existence of Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu by 1505 A.D. is a fact and their fame

even by then as *Keertankars* is ascertained when they were invited to present a 'keertan' in the court of the king. They must also, in over 50 to 100 years, have learnt other stories and songs on Lord Krishna and what they had presented in the royal court could be one of such stories. For example, if they had learnt to perform any of the *leela-s* of the Lord, which usually contained the killing of erring *rakshasas*, the story of Sambeta Guruva Raju, a modern *rakshasa* would have easily fitted in. So, keeping all conjectures aside, it is safe to place Siddhendra Yogi's times to 1400 to 1450 A.D.

The other problem that confronts us is about Bhamakalapam. The present-day text used by the Kuchipudi performers is certainly not the Siddhendra Yogi text. Though we have no knowledge about the original text, the present day text contains several *daruvus* which contain "ankitam" (dedicatory) verse to several gods and goddesses and later kings. The present text, though purportedly "written" by Mangu Jagannadham, was in reality assembled by him at the beginning of the 20th century. Perhaps he had put in all the popular *daruvus*, then in practice ; and the Kuchipudi performers by and large, use this as the basic text.

Balanthrapu Rajanikantha Rao⁴, an authority on the musical traditions of Andhra, quotes extensively from a palm-leaf text of Bhamakalapam attributed to Siddhendra Yogi, which he found in the Oriental Manuscript Library, Madras. He says that the palm-leaf Ms. should be studied closely before one would say whether this was an authentic text. However, he says that the invocation at the beginning of the text to Vighneswara in a *mattebha* stanza is also found in a much later text, *erukula kuravanji*, by Sannidhanam Jagannadha kavi and indicates the popularity of the invocatory song. The Ms. also contains a stanza in *kanda* metre and in this stanza the name of Siddhendra Yogi as the author of the text is clearly mentioned. But several *daruvus* which are found in the Ms. are not found in the Kuchipudi repertoire today. Even the pravesa daruvu, "Bhamane, Satya Bhamane" presents a different version. The variations found in the Ms. are quite solid.

Attempts were made to reconstruct the Bhama kalapam text. The A.P. Sangeeta Nataka Akademi appointed a committee⁵ to prepare a text which could presumably be called an authentic text. The committee selected all *daruvus* which do not contain a signature sign. But the new text cannot avoid some *daruvus* of others, because the situation demanded a *daruvu* and a *daruvu* without a signature was not available. It is not a satisfactory text because several songs obviously written by others are included in it. Finding the lacuna in the newly prepared text, Vedantam Parvateesam added some *daruvus* and dialogues of his own into the text⁶, along with some humourous dialogues for Madhavi, which were in vogue at the time. Today, some disciples of Parvateesam use his text for their performances.

Bhama kalapam is also called “Parijatham” or “Parijatha katha”, though the former does not contain the story of Parijathapaharanam as such. The only explanation one could offer is what Nataraja Ramakrishna said⁷ : In the Telugu performance - history all writings in which Krishna and Satyabhama appear are called “Parijathams”. This can be corroborated with several later-day Bhama kalapams which are called Parijathams.

For Bhama kalapam the story is not important. Its theme is concerned with a seemingly insignificant quarrel between Sri Krishna and his most beloved consort, Satyabhama. The contesting point is about who is more beautiful : the husband or the wife. When Sri Krishna teasingly asked her, Satyabhama says, with all her royal pride, that she is unquestionably more beautiful. Incensed, Sri Krishna leaves Satyabhama’s place and goes to Rukmini.

All this is preamble. But the actual theme is a beloved’s soulful pining for her lover. The state of separation - *vipralambha sringara* generates a new Bhama. She is proud, but she is also immensely in love with her lover. She searches for him in anxiety and asks her confidante Madhavi’s advice. Madhavi taunts her from time to time for her selfishness, for her greed, for her materialistic bent of mind and her non-spiritual and mundane

attitude. She also chides her for treating the Lord only as *her* lover while He is the Lord of the Universe.

Bhama continues her anxious search for him. She remembers all the past events in her love life and goes through a series of mental states - she is *swadheenapatika*, *proshita bhatrika* and *abhisarika* - and then, by turns, she becomes a *virahotkanthita* and a *khandita*. By acting out the *ashta-vidha-nayikas* by turns the helpless Bhama swoons. She recovers and wants to commit suicide, if her lover doesn't come back to her. She requests her maid Madhavi to meet Sri Krishna and tell him about her present state of desperation and bring him back. Madhavi says that she cannot undertake such an arduous task unless she is properly rewarded. Madhavi demands all the precious ornaments Satyabhama wears. Though reticent in the beginning, she concedes later. She gives away all her ornaments. Madhavi demands to have Bhama's 'mukkerā', the nose ring, which is considered sacred to married women. Satyabhama concedes that demand as well.

Satyabhama writes a letter to Sri Krishna, in which she pours out her agony. This perhaps is the climax of the *prabandham* when she addresses him, for the first time, as "deva deva" - god of the gods,, thus indicating a complete change of mind. The letter is by itself, a masterpiece of spiritual love in all its essence and a text which is incomparable in evoking *bhakti-sringara*.

Madhavi brings back Sri Krishna, but he comes accompanied by his elder *deveri*, Rukmini (sometimes with Radha, his beloved). There is a "Savathula kayyam"(a quarrel between the two co-wives), which is a popular incident in several performing arts in Andhra and Krishna pacifies both and the *prabandha* concludes on a happy note. In some other versions, Satya who pines for him, feels so incensed for having made her go through such mental agony that, when he arrives, she blames him for his unfaithfulness and finally is reconciled.

For a long time, Kuchipudi Bhama kalapam did not contain a physical entry of Sri Krishna. It is only shown by imaginative,

mimetic actions. All her rebukes go to an imagined presence of Sri Krishna, which perhaps is more dramatically suggestive than an uncouth Sri Krishna appearing on the stage and the lovable Satyabhama has to entreat him!

Kuchipudi Bhama kalapam is a *viraha prabandha* at its best. Though the story ends with a spiritual reunion between Sri Krishna and Satyabhama, these connotations are less important to enjoy the story. The story looks more like a story of separation and reunion. Neither are Satyabhama and Sri Krishna mythological figures for the spectator. They are wife and husband and are deeply in love with each other. In that sense it is enjoyed by every man and woman as though it is their own story being enacted. To make such a universally valid story of familial love and relate it to each individual life is the finest artistic achievement of Siddhendra Yogi as a writer and the achievement of the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu for having brought this rich experience to every individual who has the good fortune of witnessing it.

Bhagavathula Ramaiah and the Golla kalapam

Golla kalapam is said to have been written by Siddendra Yogi. Such a text of delicate argumentative power and devastatingly unarming social protest couched in irony, sarcasm, repartee and all the armoury at the disposal of a 15th century. Yogi could be favourably compared with the songs and poems of the greatest saints of yore who spared no one including their own caste people and their kith and kin in their criticism of human frailties.

People who saw Kuchipudi's Bhama kalapam in the last decade of the 19th century report that the performance used to be started with the entry of a Golla bhama - a shepherdess. She and the vidushaka exchange pleasantries in a mutually taunting way. In the course of the discussion that ensues Gollabhama says that the entire human kind belongs to "Golla" (shepherd community) because they are all the beloveds of the Lord who is a "Golla". The argument then turns to the vidushaka, a Brahmin, who claims that his caste is superior and having been born into it his intellectual

prowess also is unparalleled. Gollabhama chides the Brahmin that it is not the birth that makes one a Brahmin, but one's self-knowledge. She tells the Brahmin that the entire human kind is the same when born.

Gollabhama narrates the story of *Samudra Mathanam* to prove that the Lord who pervades the whole universe has intended that the human beings must live a life of self-knowledge.

At this point Sri Krishna enters and talks to the Bhama in a loving tone. Gollabhama asks Sri Krishna not to make fun of her and cleverly disappears. Sri Krishna says to the vidushaka that he is on his way to Satyabhama's palace and then starts the Bhama kalapam.

In later days, however, the aesthetic and religious connotations in starting the kalapam with Gollabhama are lost and the Gollabhama episode is thought to be out of context and is delinked with the performance of Bhama kalapam. The two kalapams have independently existed for the last one century, adding new items, expanding with newer *daruvu* inclusions. However, as Bhama kalapam now presented is not what Siddhendra Yogi had written, so is Golla kalapam. The Siddhendra Yogi version, if ever existed, is extinct.

The present version with two important episodes - now central to Golla kalapam - "Yagna pattu" and "Pindotpatti", together formulating *Atma yagnam*⁸ - is the work of Bhagavathula Ramaiah of Kuchipudi. Son of Ramalingam, Ramaiah belonged to the first half of the 18th century and was said to be a great scholar, guru and performer. The palm-leaf version of his *Atma yagnam* was saved for posterity by the great scholar and Ramaiah's son, Ramalinga Sastry and was edited by Chintalapati Laxminarasimha Sastry.

Ramaiah, the author of Golla kalapam or, at least, a part of Golla kalapam, has also practised yoga and is considered only next to Siddhendra Yogi for his contribution to Kuchipudi dance lore⁹. He is, like Siddhendra Yogi, had immense imaginative

capabilities, coupled with a mastery of performance abilities. He married thrice and for the third marriage he had a son, Ramalinga Sastry.

Ramaiah was a philosopher and performer put together. He was a mridangist of great calibre and a yoga practitioner. He was a true ‘Karma yogi’. Ramaiah lived a considerable time of his early life in Ghantasala, a village near Kuchipudi, with his two-elderly, widowed sisters, Santamma and Ghantamma. In Ghantasala he trained two devadasis-Narahari and Venkataratnam-known in their days for their ‘kalapa vidya’. His daily routine involved his early morning rituals and *yogabhyasam*, followed by his training classes at the ‘garidi’, coming back home at noon and performing ‘brahma yagnam’ and ‘pitru yagnam’ (sacrificial rituals in honour of the Gods and family elders) and then only take his food. He was greatly respected for his purity of life and his philosophical stewardship.

Ramaiah had several sorrowful incidents in his early life. Two of his wives died. He married a third time. Two of his daughters were married off quite early as was the practice, but unfortunately both of them became widows. He was so disheartened that he completely became a yogi. It was then he did ‘Vaisvadevam’, a particular kind of yagnam, and was so popularly called “Vaiswadevam Ramaiah”¹⁰.

Ramaiah’s philosophical frame of mind turned now to the lives of his fellow Brahmins, who did less to prove their brahminical purity of life than to boast of their birth and ill-treat other communities. He was sure that birth alone could not decide one’s brahminical status ; it was their actions that should elevate them to be so. This realization activated his creative genius to extend the Golla kalapam, probably a text that they had received from Siddhendra Yogi to include the ‘self-realization’ aspects of ‘atma yagnam’ through which he was trying to define what constitutes Brahminism, what tenets are to be followed in order to attain that status and thus start a charade against all the existing practices of doing rituals like ‘yagna’.

Golla kalapam is perhaps the best creative work in the area of Telugu dance literature. It is also the best in presenting an alternate philosophical point of view in the days of orthodox highheadedness. It is a kalapam with two characters - a Brahmin who boasts of superior birth and his doing 'kratus' and 'yagnas' in such a superficial way that fellow-Brahmins respect them. The other character is a Gollabhama, simple and honest but knowledgeable not only about the scriptures but also of the ways of life. Her polite, but strong, rebuttals challenging the claims made by the Brahmin about their special status because of being born into a higher caste form into one of the best examples of argumentative literature.

By tearing into pieces every proposition put forward by the Brahmin, Gollabhama reveals that all human beings are born equal and the way a *Sudra* child is born is no different from the way a Brahmin child is born. What makes the difference are the actions that one does. At this juncture the stages of development of a child in the womb of the mother are delicately and sensitively explained by her (Pindotpathi). It looks as though the entire ancient medical lore is presented here in nut shell.

The Brahmin again confronts bhama that Brahmins are those that do actions prescribed in the scriptures. Gollabhama refutes this claim as well and explains what 'yagna' means and what it involves. She tells the Brahmin that performing vedic rites will only make him a *dwija* (the twice born) and by obtaining vedic knowledge and practising its tenets will make him a *vipra* and not a Brahmin. She says that performing 'yagna' does not mean spending money and feeding people. It is making a sacrifice of one's own self - one's own separate identity and aligning himself with the supreme self. 'Brahmin' is one who attains 'Brahma vidya', the knowledge that opens up one's mind to the oneness of the universe.

Golla kalapam brings difficult philosophical and biological concepts in a question-answer format of the ancient upanishads for the sake of the common people. Golla-s are usually thought to

be innocent ('Verri Golla' is a common usage) and Siddhendra Yogi's and, following him, Rama Yogi's master stroke of ironic thrust is that this "Verri Golla" teaches the so-called knowledgeable Brahmin what real knowledge means!

References

1. There are many stories in circulation regarding Siddhendra's antecedents. B. Natarajan, the editor of *Srikrishna Leela Tarangini* is of the opinion that Narayana Tirtha and Siddhendra are one and the same. See B. Natarajan, *Srikrishna Leela Tarangini*, Madras : Mudgala Trust, 1990. p.210.
Nataraja Ramakrishna says that Siddaiah was originally from Rayalaseema and in his wanderings came over to Kuchipudi, married the daughter of Suvanam Jogavadhanulu, a Bhagavata performer and settled down there. See *Dakshinatyula Natya Kala Charitra*, Hyderabad, 1987, p.164.
2. Narayana Tirtha's *tarangams* are popular pieces in Kuchipudi repertoire.
3. "Kalabhimani", Kuchipudi Bhagavathula Puttu Poorvotharamulu," *Golconda Patrika* (Daily), September 9, 1942.
4. Balanthrapu Rajanikantha Rao, *Andhra Vaggeyakara Charitra*, (1961), Part I, p. 180.
5. Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, Mahankali Laxminarasimham and Vedantam Prahlada Sarma were the members of the committee.
6. Vedantam Parvateesam, *Kuchipudi Vari Bhama Kalapam*, Machilipatnam, 1964.
7. Nataraja Ramakrishna, op.cit. p.165.
8. *Atma yagnamu anu Golla kalapamu*, (ed.) Chintalapati Laxmi Narasimha Sastry, Ghantasala, 1986.
9. Chintalapati Laxmi Narasimha Sastry, *Atmayagnamu*, Ghantasala, 1986, p.iii.
10. Op.cit., p.ii.

III

The Kuchipudi Quartet

Introduction

The last two decades of the 19th century and the first two decades of the twentieth were trying days for arts and letters in India. Traditional literary and performance genres were looked at grudgingly ; traditional arts were going out of public patronage. The reasons were obvious : new education, new awareness, alien influences - all aided by the Indian ‘bravado’ attitude to embrace anything novel. If these were extraneous factors challenging traditional modes of creative expression, there was a conflict within the traditions of performing arts. Since each artistic form served a particular socio-religious role in a given milieu, artistic manifestations had appeared with established goals and audience patronage had been in set modes of parametres with a marginal variability. Thus each one of the classical / folk forms had a definite time-space cognition within a given context. In such a deep-rooted, ritual-based, model-fixed expressional situation, performances were regarded as a contextual necessity ; and individual efforts submerged into group activities. The group or the form became important; individuals gained recognition only through the group. When things started changing by the end of the 19th century, then started artistic problems, especially with regard to the quality of performances. The group was no more sacrosanct, because its public image was dwindling due to audience apathy. So the role of a talented individual performer came to the fore. A recognized artist could still muster enough invitations within the now-limited offers. Other artists had to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

The artistic need to survive the onslaught of the newly-emerging cultural modes directed the destinies of all performing arts. This necessity was much more in the case of the classical

arts. Groping for new avenues for survival and at the same time retain artistic freedom were the twin goals of the artistic community when the new era dawned. The situation of the Kuchipudi art was no different.

The first one to blaze a new trail in this regard was Chinta Venkataramaiah (1860-1949), a pioneer who invested the Kuchipudi people with a new form called the yakshagana. Yakshagana was not new to Andhra. But the way it was adapted to the classical stage of Kuchipudi needed an imaginative mind and a bold personality, the two qualities that personified Venkataramaiah.

Simple and lovable, Venkataramaiah brought to Kuchipudi the touch of friendliness from among the practioners and a rich fare true to the *Natya Mela sampradayam*¹ to the connoisseurs of dance. A deep sense of faith in the artistic capabilities of his fellow artists, Chinta created a broad - based canvas to work upon. Though it was not intended to be so, the yakshagana, in the first decades of the 20th c., helped to retain the Kuchipudi artists together. Besides Bhama and Golla kalapams, yakshagana had come to stay.

Along with the emergence of new traditions, the continuity of the age-old formats also continued. Among the traditional performers who excelled in presenting Bhama kalapam and Golla kalapam, Vempati Venkatanarayana (1871 - 1935) stands supreme. He was seen as an epitome of perfection in both the kalapams and also excelled in Dadinamma and Balintha Vesha kathas. He was the last all-rounder and was the tallest of all the early generation dancers. His contribution to the continuing tradition of the kalapams which was losing its age-old charm is many-sided. He stands as a bridge between the old times and the new.

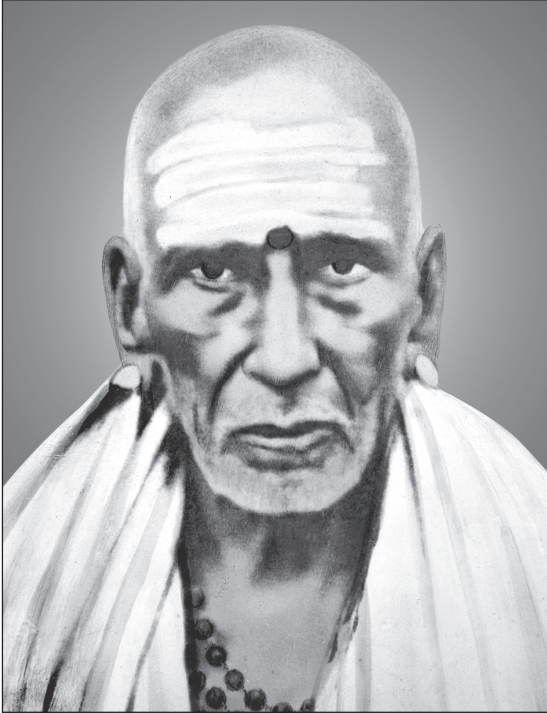
The third in the quartet was Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, who was good at the Bhama Vesham and the traditional modes of Kuchipudi art. But he was an independent man since childhood. When the yakshagana gained popularity and family - repertories ('Melams') were growing, he simply practised and taught what he knew best and what he thought best for Kuchipudi: *sattvikabhinaya*, which he mastered at the feet of his guru, Vempati

Venkatanarayana. In the aftermath of yakshagana with its celebration of multiple emotions, *sattvika*, which for long had been the touchstone of Kuchipudi art, was relegated almost to the background (except in a few scenes of *Usha Parinayam* and *Mohini Rukmangada*). Vedantam felt sorry for this precarious position. He knew that his generation was gearing up to new avenues of expression. Nor could he afford to retain the old tradition because he did not have a 'melam' of his own. This position gave him freedom to invent and experiment. He started teaching the individual items, which were hitherto performed as a part of the kalapams - *sabdams*, *tarangams*, *padams* and *javalis*². And in later years, with the help of Ayyanki Thandava Krishna he had ushered in a new age in Kuchipudi dance history which stands for an emphasis on *sattvikabhinaya*. He taught several youngsters, who were to be the leaders of the Kuchipudi movement in later years, solo dancers with emphasis on short, self-sustained, independent items which resulted in creating a rich solo dance repertoire.

The fourth in the quartet is not a pioneer in dance, but a man who steered the destinies of the dancers with a proper musical training. Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu taught every Kuchipudi artist, for four generations, classical music so that their dance art is properly synthesised with musical virtuosity. A later contemporary of Chinta Venkataramaiah, Anjaneyulu's training the young people in classical music put them in good stead, for a Kuchipudi artist must dance and also sing his own songs and deliver his own dialogues, which no other classical dance form demands.

If the strength of the Kuchipudi artist as an all-round and proficient performer, it is due to the equal emphasis he gives to dancing and singing. Seetharamanjaneyulu was like a citadel of music for all the Kuchipudi artists, whether they chose yakshaganas or kalapams. From Chinta Krishna Murthy to Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, every Kuchipudi artist learnt music from the great maestro and he deserves the gratitude of not only the Kuchipudi artists, but also six decades of connoisseurs of Kuchipudi dance and yakshagana music.

Chinta Venkataramaiah (1860 - 1949) and the Kuchipudi Yakshagana Tradition



What every person needs are *koodu* (food), *gudda* (clothing) and *needa* (a roof on our head). If these are essential needs of a person, the same are needed for an art to sustain and please the audience. *Bhava* is the food (which sustains the art); *raga* is the appropriate clothing which gives the *bhava* shape, beauty and musicality; and *tala* is the dwelling in which we live because the *bhava* and *raga* in our art are pegged to the abode of *tala*.¹

Thus spake a lean, withering man, in his 80's, wearing a lion cloth and an *angavastram*, sitting on the 'portals'² of his verandah (a low-roofed thatched house) to a tiny group of youngsters in a low voice, as though he was speaking to himself; as though he was speaking out his conviction of an art form; which he conceived, ordained to his people as their sole property for the

next one hundred years and more - almost like a second Siddhendra Yogi, reborn to resurrect the waning lives of the artist community of his village - perhaps to resurrect himself and in the process find emancipation for the future generations.

The man was Chinta Venkataramaiah, who perhaps unknowingly and unconsciously ventured into an artistic exploration of a new medium, the yakshagana. Finding that his present journey was irksome since the path was thorny and its destiny indistinct, he was, so to say, trying to find an alternate path to traverse and take his small group of followers with him onto a dependable road and perhaps to a predictable destination. With the help of an ingenious colleague, Hari Madhavayya³, venturesome and bold at the same time, he found the broad skeletons of a danceplay and imbued it with life blood of new and vibrant creativity.

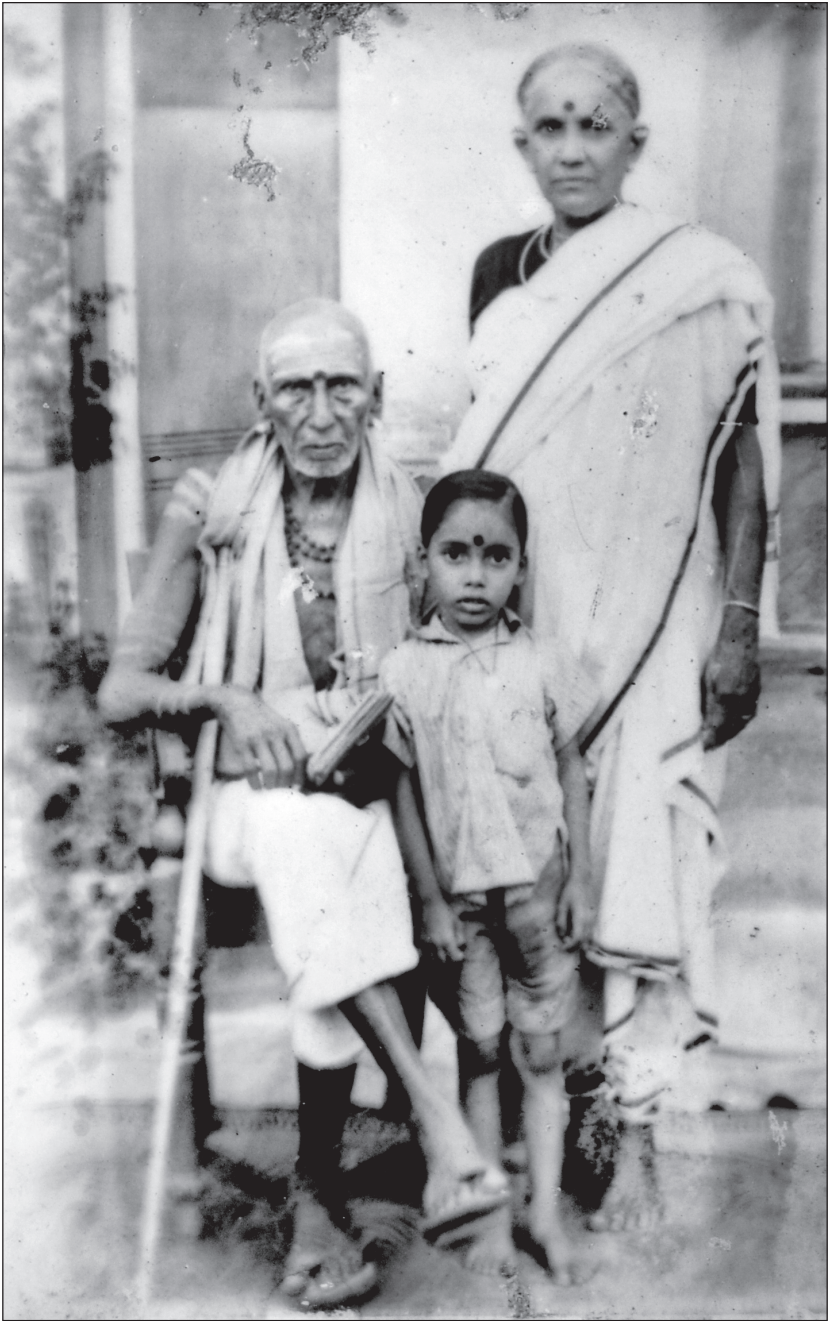
For this man, art was a sustaining force - both physically and intellectually. Sustenance needs three important things according to him - *koodu* (food), *gudda* (clothing) and *needa* (a dwelling). As a man who lived on the ancient dictum of low living and high thinking, he found that these were the needs of his art as well. The artistic needs were *bhava*, *raga* and *tala*. These, he believed, were the backbone of a successful theatrical performance as he envisaged it. He found these in the new form. And he found this an extension of what they were doing for the last four hundred years. These three elements, he would often say, were the 'thri-karanas' of an artist; the mere transmutations of *mano-vak-kaya*-s enunciated as essences of human activity as per our ancient lore. The mind-mood-movement synthesis was what he aimed at and achieved. Venkataramaiah's greatness lies in the search for a classical form, the norms of which lie within the parameters of his ancestral vocation and evolving the form into a viable alternative (it is not an alternative form as such, but only complementary to the form they were practising). The tripartite division mentioned by him suggests that the essential needs of life are also the life-blood of art; thereby asserting that his art is his life and living one is living the other.

Early Life

Born in 1860 to Sivaramayya and Arundhati as the third son among four sons⁴, Chinta Venkataramaiah's life was uneventful in his younger days. He was not groomed into dance at the age of five as all the boys of Kuchipudi, as he was reticent (his mother thought it was 'shyness'). However, Venkataramaiah had a keen eye and keener ears for the art. His elder brother, Venkataratnam, by then a proven artist and talented performer, assisted his father in imparting dance lessons to the few students assembled, besides doing nattuvangam for Bhama kalapam. Venkataramaiah, after the students left, would reproduce *in toto* what was taught to them by his brother - all this before his mother. His retentive power and his power of reproducing what he saw or heard was unheard of. When his brother heard of this from his mother and saw it for himself hiding behind a paddy sack in the frontyard, he was greatly relieved and delighted. Venkataramaiah was first drawn into Kuchipudi art by Yeleswarapu Narayanappa, a well-known teacher and practitioner. He was slowly groomed into the Chinta group and he soon became an expert performer, first doing solo pieces of *sabdam*, *dasavataralu* or *javali*, when his brother did the role of Satyabhama in Bhama kalapam.

When Venkataramaiah settled down in the role of 'Bhama', after several years of rigorous training, his brother Venkataratnam, who was god-minded, made Venkataramaiah in - charge of the Melam and went on his spiritual quest. Venkataramaiah was obliged to accept the assignment as he could not say no to his brother, who was his mentor. This was in the year 1876. Thus providence brought him into the centre of an activity the intricacies of which he was not aware.

The situation in the field of dance in 1880's and 90's when Venkataramaiah took over the reins of his company was not bright. There were no opportunities even for normal sustenance, because the competition was high and the aspiring beneficiaries were numerous. There was bitter competition and animosity among practitioners, vying with one another to grab the few opportunities



Chinta Venkataramaiah and Annapurnaamma with a grand child

they got. All of them had to rely only on Bhama kalapam and there was no other alternative. The earlier generation of great actors no more existed and the need to perform led them to a nomadic life.

During one such sojourn, Venkataramaiah, along with his brother Narayana Murthy and his friend, colleague and compatriot, Hari Madhavaiah was camping at Nellore where Madhavaiah saw a performance of *Prahlada* by a local team.⁵ It was quite different from the type of performances they were doing. Madhavaiah was so impressed by the format of this yakshaganam that he immediately went to Venkataramaiah and insisted that they do something like this. Venkataramaiah had all his doubts. How could they jump into another type of stage presentation? What would they know about Yakshagana? How would they be sure of its reception? How would they manage to have so many actors to take up male and female roles? Many questions - and no answers.

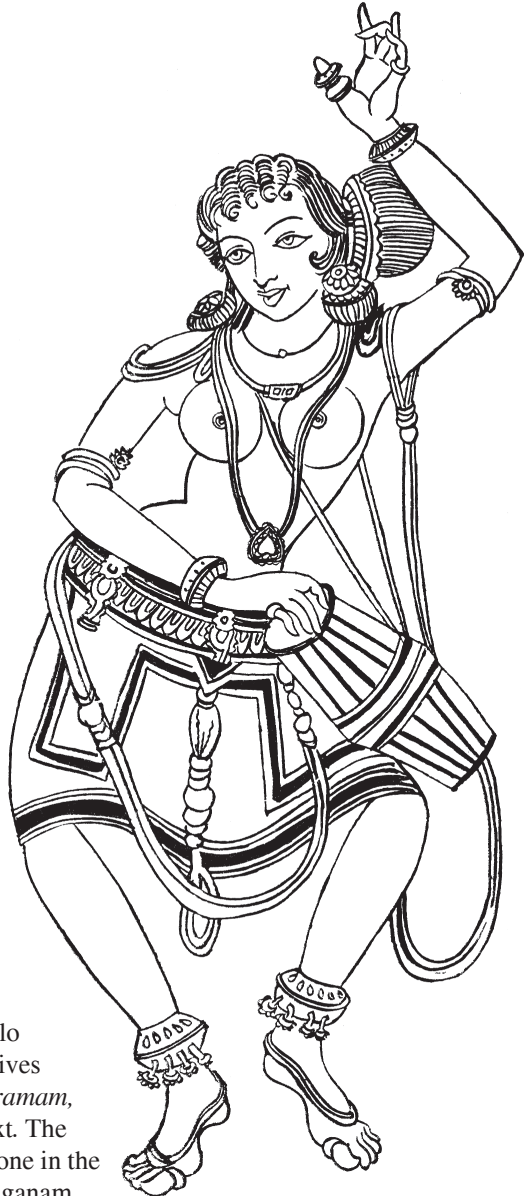
Madhavaiah, the wise man that he was, told Venkataramaiah that all things would take their own course and argued that they should make a sincere and concerted effort to start something like this. He also argued that their kalapams were for the intellectuals: to reach wider audiences, they needed a more lively and ebullient theatrical form. Venkataramaiah was at last convinced that they should do something in order to sustain people's interest in them and agreed to Madhavaiah's suggestion that they should also include some yakshaganas in their repertoire.

The group got into action. They chose Vedala Tiru Narayanacharya's *Prahlada Natakam*.⁶ The choice was partly due to the fact that the group had seen a performance of *Prahlada* earlier. Secondly, the play needed a small cast. Thirdly, the female role in it was not a prominent one that required a lot of training. *Prahlada* was the first of a successful series of yakshaganas to follow and proved that Venkataramaiah and his team were worthy of the experiment.

Yaksha-ganam and Yakshaganam

The word "Yaksha" and "gana" were used as two distinct words to mean the singing of Yakshas (Yaksha's gana), probably a tribe in Andhra. Started perhaps as a form of devotional singing in regional metres at religious festivals, Yakshagana soon developed into a full-fledged dramatic form. The word means 'the singing of the Yakshas'. Some argue that there was a particular tribe (Yakshas or Jakkulu) which practised singing as a profession and the native Telugu word "Jakkula" is sanskritised into "Yaksha" when their performances became elitist.

An imaginary drawing of a 'Jakkula Purandhri', a solo singer-performer of narratives as described in *Kreedabhiramam*, a 14th century dramatic text. The narrative phase is the first one in the development of the Yakshaganam.



There seem to be three stages⁷ in the development of yakshagana as a dramatic form. The first one was the 'Recitational (Narrative) form' when stories were narrated by a single person (usually a woman) who sang the story in native metres and while narrating, enacted the various roles with changing emotions. The second stage is a 'Samvada stage' wherein the chief narrator became the Sutradhara in a two-character play. Strictly speaking, kalapam belongs to this stage and is a perfect representative of this genre at this stage. The third one is the 'dramatic' stage of development when more characters acted out a more complex story. Singing, narrative and dramatic elements are present in the form at each stage, but at each one of its stages of development, there is a greater emphasis on one of the elements, the other two subservient to it.⁸ This could be seen in the development of the yakshagana in the Nayaka and Maratha courts where yakshagana flourished.

A cleared and cleaned place at the centre of a village is its acting area. No curtain is used. *titti* (for *sruti*), maddela and cymbals (for rhythm) are the only instruments used. A 'Sutradhara' introduces the story after the necessary invocation, assisted by a group of 'vanthas' (co-singers) who repeat what either the Sutradhara or the actors sing. The prose connections (*sandhi-vachanalu*) in the story are supplied by the Sutradhara, who is occasionally aided by a humorous character (*hasyagadu*). Though no female artist participated in yakshagana performances as such until the 18th century, there are references to their participation later.

However, by the time the Kuchipudi group decided to perform yakshaganas, the form was widely popular in the rural areas since several caste groups took it up and started performing.¹⁰ When it went into the uninitiated novices, the genre lost its well-constructed and elegantly performing norms and remained a mere rustic entertainer. Hari Madhavaiah and the group must have seen one of these at Nellore.

Between 1880 (1896?) and 1920, Chinta and his group produced eight yakshaganas. They toured with the plays all over Andhra. Bhamam kalapam stayed with the group all along;

occasionally Golla kalapam also was presented if asked for. Venkataramaiah took no time in consolidating the Melam. He consulted the other Melams of the village about the new project and everyone agreed to join hands in this new venture and consented to work under Chinta Vari Melam.

The eight plays that were taken up by the Chinta repertory are:

| Play | Author |
|--|--|
| 1. <i>Prahlada Natakam</i> | Vedala Tirunarayanacharyulu |
| 2. <i>Usha Parinayam</i> | Rentachintala Chidambara kavi |
| 3. <i>Mohini Rukmangada</i> (Rukmangada Charitra) | Yenuguluri Papa Raju ^{12/} Bethapudi Bhagavantharao |
| 4. <i>Rama Natakam</i> | Tirunagaru Ananthadasa Kavi |
| 5. <i>Gaya Natakam</i> | Vallabhaneni Ramakrishnayya |
| 6. <i>Sasirekha Parinayam</i> | Vallabhaneni Choudari |
| 7. <i>Rukmini Parinayam</i> | Gudimella Tirumala Narasimhacharyulu/ Bollareddy Kotireddy ¹³ |
| 8. <i>Harischandreeyam</i> ¹⁴ | V.T. Perumallaiah |

At a much later stage, after the demise of the elder Chinta, the group produced *Vipranarayana* and *Ksheerasagara Mathanam*.

Chinta and the making of a Yakshagana

It looks beyond one's comprehension that a man like Chinta Venkataramaiah, docile and gentlemanly as he was, could undertake and successfully implement such a seemingly difficult project as producing plays in a format altogether new to their professional group. Chinta was always known as a genial man with a touch of humour. His simplicity in his daily life and his

approach to teaching, are proverbial. He is, as people say, not well-educated; neither did he reach those heights as were found in any of his two later contemporaries, Vempati Venkatanarayana and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry did. But he was a visionary and was humane. His disciples and friends, members of his household and even mere acquaintances stated that he was always friendly; he reached out to people; they never saw him angry and treated all kindly.

Two important facets of Chinta's personality answer these seemingly contradictory qualities in him; one, his docile character and moderate education vs. his unique production skills as a master-craftsman of exceptional theatrical pieces, which implied bold decisions and impeccable discipline. One has to concede that behind this soft visage of the man lies a stubborn personality which is further sharpened by ready wit and natural, inborn spirit of adventurism. Further, a deep sense of the need for finding an alternative vocation and, at the same time, for upholding the classical purity of Kuchipudi art are behind the experiments made by him.

The concept of 'classicism' which beckoned the best minds of Kuchipudi into action was simply based on two things (the parameters of "do's" and "dont's" that teacher after teacher insisted upon): firstly, that any work they produce must have similar characteristics they find in Bhama kalapam, for it is the *sine quo non* of, a kind of an accepted litmus test for, any intellectual and creative preoccupation and secondly, it should be dissimilar to the same kind of plays popular in the rural areas, which presented plays as celebration, which presented them for the story content; not as a piece in which the content and the characters, the *abhinaya* and the style adhere to principles that eventually lead to aesthetic pleasure. In short, the rural plays were performed for their own pleasure as amateur exercises, whereas theirs were for others, especially for well-informed and knowledgeable audiences.

Chinta's 'stubbornness' is another word for his perseverance of taking any thing he undertakes to its logical end. Seen early in



The oldest photograph (of *Prahlada*) available (1890): Hari Chalapathi as Hiranyakasipa, Vempati Paradesi as Leelavathi, Chinta Venkataramaiah as Narada and Vempati Chalamaiah as Prahlada. The photograph was obtained by Ayyanki Thandava Krishna and the figures identified by Sri Vedantam Raghavaiah (1964)

his life as "shyness" by his mother, his "stubbornness" is basically his apathy to 'regimentation' which was the order of his day in imparting training to youngsters. He was on his own when no restrictions were imposed either on him or his creative freedom. That could be seen in his early, momentous and intuitive learning of the art and could again be seen in his venturesome recreativity of an altogether novel form. The second quality that is strikingly obvious in him is his sense of perfection. He was sure that what they were now doing was going to be a bread-winner for several of them in future; but he was also sure that if they fail, they would miss a whole life-time's opportunity. Caught between the dragon and the deep sea, he ventured to plunge into the deep sea. Besides, he had the wise advice of a life-long friend, Hari Madhavaiah and willing-to-venture group with him. Both his elder and younger brothers were with him although this venture. His colleagues like Hari Chalapati joined him and the elders gladly blessed the venture.

Venkataramaiah was virtually in charge of everything that went into the production. The first thing that challenged him was the preparation of a performance text. We can take *Prahlada Natakam* as a case in point. The play was perhaps written between 1864 and 1896¹⁵ and was published in 1896. We do not know when Venkataramaiah produced it for the first time. Did he use the manuscript edition that he got from the Nellore team or did he do it after it was published ? We cannot for certain say. But, looking at the practicalities, it could not be immediately after he took over the Chinta vari Melam, i.e., 1876. He was hardly 16 at the time. The production, as it received public acclaim and newspaper reporting, was a very mature one. Even Madhavaiah, who was also of his age would not have advised him to undertake such an irksome job when he and his friend were in their teens.

Even the Kuchipudi elders would not have blessed the project unless they were sure that Venkataramaiah was capable of undertaking it. Even before he undertook the production of the yakshagana, the first task of Venkataramaiah must have been to consolidate his now-enlarged team containing three Melams of

the village and make it the best in the village. It looks as though he later toured virtually every *samsthanam* in Andhra and was honoured for his prortayals of the two bhama veshams. It is only safe to presume that the first production of *Prahlada*, in such a case took place in 1896. when the script was frist published. If it were to be earlier than that, we do not have evidences yet.

The published text and the Kuchipudi performance text are always varied and that explains how the performance text is made.¹⁶ For example, the "Amba paraku" and the other poorava ranga preliminaries which are traditional pieces and not found in the yakshagana texts, are retained. (This is true with all the yakshaganas). The *patra pravesa daruvus* and *samvada daruvus* are taken from the text. *Slokas*, *padams* and other traditional invocatory songs, *dandakams*, etc., are added; popular poems from Pothana's *Bhagavatham* are incorporated. In addition to the *stotram* (prayer) in the *daruvu* format (in 'panthuvareli ragam' and 'ata talam') "Rakshamam sada muda hare..." there is also a popular *dandakam* added to it with the option of leaving one of the two. Similarly, the longish "Singadu - Singi samvadam" which will take a full one-hour in performance was trimmed and their *pravesa daruvu* and Singadu's enumeration of the different types of snakes is retained, though in a three-night performance of *Prahlada*, this is also retained.

Further additions of several *slokas*, *padams*, *tarangams*, *ashtapadis*, *javalis* and other metrical forms had been incorporated wherever necessary. The newly incorporated song or poem must fit into the context and mood of the situation and it should be from well-known texts. Such inclusions are less in *Prahlada*, but in later texts free borrowing of traditional items find their place in abundance.

The careful inclusion of the musical score to several desi metres is Chinta's finest achievement. Yogi Ramaiah. a scholar well versed in sahitya advised Chinta on the texts.¹⁷ Venkataramaiah had also the advantage of having Bokka Kumara Swamy¹⁸, a proven musician in his team and a brother of his eldest

son-in-law Seetaramaiah, to help him in music. Very often, the whole team was involved in setting the music and was incorporated after a final approval from Venkataramaiah. Though for the first two plays - *Prahlada* and *Usha* - music was done by the group together, from *Mohini Rukmangada* onwards Bokka Kumaraswamy was in-charge of the musical score. He was assisted by Boddapati Sanjeeva Rao of Mukkonda, near Kuchipudi, who was proficient in classical Carnatic music. It was also said that Venkataramaiah liked two ragas especially - *Devagandhari* and *Saurashtra* and he used them wherever they fitted into the mood. The difficult challenge of giving musical score to *kandardhams* and some *desi* metres like *ela* are successfully overcome thanks to the active participation of actors like Vedantam Chalapati and his elder brother Venkataratnam.

In later plays performed after 1910, insertions freely followed keeping in view the contemporary trends in mainstream Telugu drama. The contemporary theatre was, by and large, 'musical'. It was called 'padya natakam', in which poems abounded; prose was merely used for connecting two poetic renderings. Since 'padyam' dominated the contemporary theatre, the team also included poems from popular plays of the day into their performances. For example, *Rama natakam* a fine piece with high literary value, has incorporated poems from *Lava Kusa*, a popular play of the day written by Panditha K. Subrahmanya Sastry. Similarly, a sizeable number of poems and passages from Bethapudi Bhagawantha Rao's *Rukmangada* found their place in Kuchipudi performance. *Gaya Natakam* borrowed several poems from Chilakamarti Laxminarasimham's popular play, *Gayopakhyanam*.

The Repertoire

After *Prahlada's* triumphant tour in Andhra districts, the team took up *Usha Parinayam* by Rentachintala Chidambara kavi. One of the most popular plays of Kuchipudi repertoire, this play went into the masses with masterly performances by Vedantam

Raghavaiah and Mahankali Satyanarayana in the second generation of Venkataramaiah's disciples and Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma and Mahankali Sriramulu in the fourth generation of actors.

Rama Natakam by Tirunagaru Ananthadasa Kavi also gained much popularity. Each one of the plays created performance history. Then followed *Sasirekha Parinayam* and *Gaya Natakam*. By the time they took up these two plays, after a decade of hectic activity, Venkataramaiah befriended several important patrons all over Andhra. Zamindars invited him to perform in palaces and honoured the group. Patrons came forward to sponsor their plays. Two instances reveal their popularity. The first one, which is spread by word of mouth (such stories abound in Kuchipudi and several times these are taken as authentic history), is about an incident that occurred in Nellore in one of their early tours. During the temple festival of Ranganatha Swamy, Venkataramaiah's troupe was invited to perform *Prahlada* and reached Nellore a day earlier. That night Rajamani, a dancer from the South performed *abhinaya*, which contained several Kshetrappa and Sarangapani *padams*. After the show, Chinta Venkataramaiah was invited to speak. Venkataramaiah spoke so eloquently about the *padams* in general and Rajamani's performance in particular, adding colour by his own demonstration that the audience stood up in appreciation and honoured him. For the next night's performance of *Prahlada*, dance lovers and scholars thronged. Venkataramaiah requested Rajamani also to attend. She obliged.

After the performance (it was dawn by the time the play was over), Rajamani was invited to speak. She extolled every one in the cast. She particularly mentioned the excellent "expressive" performance of Vedantam Chalapati (as Leelavathi) who did the one *daruvu* "kata kata... ee viyogametulorthunu..." in *rag Neelambari*, with elaborate *sangat*s and she told the assemblage that her life had been fully blessed. She was able to take only a spoon-full of water from the ocean of *abhinaya* of the Kuchipudi people, she said. This instance throws light not only on the expert presentation of the troupe, but also on the good rapport built up

by Venkataramaiah wherever he went. It was said that this one incident earned them 64 *Prahladas* in Nellore district alone!

Another instance from another generation of actors would show how the popularity of the Kuchipudi troupe grew from time to time. In the mid-1920's, the troupe had gone to Kollur in Guntur district, a much respected Brahmin *agraharam*, known for its munificence. Usually the Kuchipudi teams were welcome to present their kalapams in the village and the villagers were always generous and munificent. Venktaramaiah went there with Bhama kalapam and *Usha Parinayam*. The chief patron of Venkataramaiah was Bhagavathula Laxminarayana, a landlord. After seeing, young Raghavaiah in Bhama kalapam he was so pleased with his performance that he sent his men to all the neighbouring villages that a new prodigy was going to do 'Usha' that evening. The performance that evening was such a thumping success that people from the neighbouring villages vied with each other to invite the team to perform the play in the name of their family. The team had performed 34 *Usha Parinayams* in Kollur and its neighbouring villages alone and had bookings until the next six months! We are told that the troupe did not go back home those six months. If their kith and kin wanted to see them, they would cross Krishna and come to Kollur!

A third incident landed them at the threshold of other patrons! Venkataramaiah and his troupe went to perform in Jammi Golvepalli, a village near Gudivada of Krishna District. After they presented *Usha* there, the landlord of the village, Vallabhaneni Ramakrishnaiah showered encomiums on them and told Venkataramaiah that he would provide them all facilities in his village if only they would practise and perform *Gayanatakam*, a yakshaganam written by him. Venkataramaiah consulted his team members and agreed to do so. Thus the troupe came down to Golvepalli, stayed there for four months to set the play. Its first performance was given in that village when the whole village got together and honoured the Guru with a Ganda Penderam (a golden anklet). This was in 1908.

Similar was the case with *Sasirekha Parinayam*, written by the younger brother of Ramakrishnaiah, Vallabhaneni Choudary. The troupe again came to the village, stayed there to practise the play. It was performed in 1911 as was mentioned in the printed text of the play published in 1912. Both the plays received extensive patronage over the next 50 years.

According to one important source, even *Rukmini Kalyanam*¹⁹ was prepared in the same manner, when Bollareddy Kotireddy, a landlord of Ganapavaram near Mylavaram requested Venkataramaiah to perform his play. The troupe went there to practise the play with the author present during all the rehearsals. The troupe usually contained Chinta Ventaramaiah, Hari Chalapathi, Chinta Audinarayana and Neelachalam from Nangigadda, their first mridangist. (He was the chief mridangist of many Nangigadda Devadasi-s who were taught by Chinta Venkataramaiah and other Kuchipudi gurus). Pasumarthi Venkateswarlu, a grandson of Venkataramaiah, stayed with the team to accompany them on harmonium. Later Mahankali Subba Rao joined as a harmonist who stayed with the team for a long time.

It looked as though that all the plays were selected by Venkataramaiah because they contained several theatrical elements in them - with varying degrees of hero-villain conflict. The bad characters rave and rant with rhythmic thumping to be finally outwitted by innocent youngsters. Only *Harischandra* had a different format, but it is a play which had earned popularity in the mainstream theatre even by 1905, when almost every professional theatre group was performing the play. The Kuchipudi exponents, while retaining the popular poems of Balijepalli Laxmikantham, the author of the stage play, added a couple of *daruvus* to Nakshatraka, which became popular in the rural areas.

'Bhakti' or 'Rakti' seems to be the central motif of all these plays. While *Prahlada*, *Rukmangada* and *Harischandra* belong to the first category, *Usha*, *Sasirekha* and *Rukmini Kalyanam* belong to the second. *Gayopakhyanam* and *Rama Natakam* had

other components that attracted the audience, popular 'verbal - duel.' Both the *padayams* and *daruvus* used in them are teasingly exhilarating!

As in all professional groups that undertake frequent tours, the Chinta troupe also indulged in type - casting. It is safe since the Melams had a *tamasa* character, a *rajasa* character, a *hasya* character, a child character, a woman character and saint (rishi) character. Each character has a special make-up system. The rishi characters wore white facial makeup and white beards with ochre coloured clothes. The *tamasa* characters had red as a dominant colour and the *rajasa* characters blue and yellow.

Chinta as a Teacher

Chinta's work with the actors was both friendly and authoritative. While teaching, this guru was the very symbol of friendship - understanding and felicitous. During performance one saw the other side of him - a strict and punishing disciplinarian! As a guru he had two qualities that befriended him to the disciples. One was his overbearing attitude of friendship. He would be more a friend than a teacher. He would cajole an iridescent boy, talk to him about nice things and try to convince him about a point he was making. Since all the boys lived around his house, he would go to their houses in the dead of the night, wake the unwilling sleepy boys up to teach them a series of *adavus* or *mudras* that he had forgotten that morning or he thought of at that moment! This attitude of reaching out to the *sishtyas* at odd hours was favourably reported not only by his students, but also from his daughter-in-law herself.

Another solicitous quality in him as a teacher was that he wouldn't go further in the lessons until a disciple got the required effect to his satisfaction either in the dialogue or song, the movement or the gestures or in the emoting of *bhavas*. Though the disciples were unhappy about their teacher's "stubbornness" as they called it when they were learning - now they remember the memorable days and agree that if he were not such a task master,

they would not have learnt anything. "Perfection" was his aim.

From 1876 to 1890, which was Chinta's apprentice period, he learnt much from his environs, from the world at large, but mainly from his own troupe members. If Hari Madhavaiah stood as a tower of strength by his side, Vedantam Chalapati and his own brother Audinarayana and Yeleswarapu Ramakrishnayya were always with him to give him advice, assurance and comfort. Later, when he came on to his own, when he was recognized and honoured, he took the group along with him. He always claimed that it was a combined effort and a combined success as he would say.

Honours came his way unsought. The Challapalli, Muktyala, Rachur and Nuzivid zamindars honoured him with "ganda penderam" and "simha talatam". The Kanchi Kama Koti Peethadhipathi Sri Sankaracharya, while travelling from Kollur to Machilipatnam travelled via Kuchipudi, ordered for a performance of Bhama kalapam and honoured him with the title "Natya Samrat".²⁰

The eight yakshaganas that brought the Chinta vari Melam universal recognition and approbation were extolled for their musical and rhythmical perfection. Each character's own *vachika*-rendering and singing attracted the learned and the knowledgeable. These, along with proper character portrayal and the expression of the proper emotions were the key to their success.

Chinta Venkataramaiah's troupe used to perform all their plays at a stretch for 15 days. The itinerary would be as follows: Bhama kalapam (one night), *Prahlada* (3 nights), *Sasirekha Parinayam* (1 night), *Rama Natakam* (2 nights). *Usha Parinayam* (2 nights), *Harischandreeyam* (2 nights), *Mohini Rukmangada* (2 nights), *Gaya Natakam* (1 night) and finally Golla Kalapam (1 night). Several village festivals invited the troupe to perform 2 or 3 plays at a time.

Each play has its own scheme of writing as well as its performance techniques. For example, *Prahlada* was performed for 3 nights, but it was also staged for one night. The plays

performed between 1896 and 1936 were numerous and required the participation of young and old in Kuchipudi. There were at least four generations of actors that were trained by Venkataramaiah and almost everyone participated in his plays in one role or the other. It might be difficult to give all the names of people that so participated, but a list of the major participants may be tentatively drawn.

Major Actors in Yakshaganas in each generation

First Generation :

| | | |
|------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Chinta Venkataramaiah | : | Nattuvangam and the roles of saints |
| Hari Venkatachalapati | : | Rakshasa roles |
| Bokka Seetharamaiah | : | Male lead roles |
| Vedantam Chalapati | : | Female roles |
| Vempati Chalamaiah | : | Child roles |
| Chinta Narayana Murthy | : | Female roles |
| Vedantam Ramaiah | : | Co-singer |
| Vempati Paradesi | : | Child roles and later, female roles |

Second generation :

| | | |
|-------------------------|---|--|
| Chinta Venkataramaiah | : | Leader and Nattuvangam |
| Chinta Rama Murthy | : | Lead female roles and later, Nattuvangam |
| Vedantam Ramakrishnaiah | : | Lead male roles |
| Vempati Paradesi | : | Male lead roles |
| Chinta Krishna Murthy | : | Lead male roles and later Nattuvangam |
| Chinta Audinarayana | : | Female roles and other male roles |



A third generation production of *Prahlada* with Chinta Krishnamurthy leading.

Third Generation :

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Chinta Krishna Murthy | : Leader and Nattuvangam |
| Mahankali Satyanarayana | : Rakshasa roles |
| Vedantam Raghavaiah | : Female lead roles |
| Chinta Seetharamanjaneyulu | : Male roles |
| Darbha Venkateswarlu | : Humourous roles |
| Pasumarthi Kondalarayudu | : Lead male roles (especially Harischandra) |
| Vedantam Prahlada Sarma | : Female and Secondary male roles (esp. Seetha) |
| Bhagavathula Laxmi Narasimham | : Female lead, especially in Bhamakalapam |
| Vedantam Parvateesam | : Secondary male & female roles |
| Bhagavathula Ramakotaiah | : Secondary female roles |
| PVG Krishna Sarma | : Child roles |
| Bokka Kumaraswamy | : Instrumentalist |

Fourth Generation :

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Chinta Krishna Murthy | : Nattuvangam & leader |
| Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy | : Female lead |
| Darbha Venkateswarlu | : Secondary male & female roles |
| Mahankali Venkaiah | : <i>tamasa</i> roles (like Viswamitra) |
| Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry | : Female lead roles |
| Mahankali Sreeramulu Sarma | : Male lead roles |
| P.V.G. Krishna Sarma | : Nattuvangam, Co-singer |

Fifth Generation :

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Chinta Krishna Murthy | : Nattuvangam & leader |
| Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma | : Female lead roles |
| Darbha Venkateswarlu | : Secondary male and female roles |
| Mahankali Satyanarayana | : <i>Tamasa</i> roles |
| Vedantam Rattiah Sarma | : <i>tamasa</i> roles (thiranga kasipa) |
| Mahankali Sreeramulu Sarma | : Male lead roles |
| P.V.G. Krishna Sarma | : Co-singer and Nattuvangam |
| Pasumarthi Rattaiah | : Secondary female roles |

Yakshagana and Venkatramaiah's Performance strategies

Kuchipudi Yakshagana's special attributes in performance strategies deserve to be studied. Among the several traditional modes they followed, one is "mela prapti" - synchronizing all the instrumentalists with the singers as a finale of the *poorva ranga*. The Sutradhara, the main singer, the two pairs of cymbalists and the mridangist join together to achieve this synchronization. The singer recites *jatis* in *dhruta kalam* and the Sutradhara follows on

cymbals. By the time the *jati* is finished and a *teermanam* is brought, the *poorvaranga* ritual is completed.

Another important musical rendering is "nritya pallavi" - taking the last one-fourth phrase in the last line of the *daruvu* which is made into a special rhythmic phrase and is transformed into what is popularly called *sabdam*. Adding it with appropriate *jatis* and end the *daruvu* on a note of both *sabdam* and *jati* will result in the character's "situational emotion".

Several other special features like introducing of *jathis* between the *pravesa daruvu* and *sandhi vachanam* and to interchange the *tristra* and the *chaturasra jati* modulations are the forte of Chinta Venkataramaiah in providing dance music.

The group owes its success to several musicians in Kuchipudi for their guidance. Challapalli Seetharamiah and Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjanyulu continuously trained actors in music. Several actors were simultaneously students of Chinta Venkataramaiah and Vempati Venkatanarayana, who excelled in *abhinaya*. Pasumarti Seetharamiah, himself a guru, accompanied the team as a harmonist. The 4th generation actors continued to perform even after Chinta's death. Venkatarama Natya Mandali continued the tradition with Chinta Krishna Murthy as the leader and PVG as a singer. In the next generation came Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Vedantam Rattiah Sarma, Mahankali Sreeramulu Sarma and Pasumarthi Rattayya.

Last days of Chinta Venkataramaiah

When he retired from active performance schedule in 1936, Venkataramaiah was a satisfied man. He had done what no man had done in the knowledgeable past in Kuchipudi except of course, Siddhendra Yogi and Bhagavatula Ramaiah. He had borrowed a wayward form, gave blood and bones to it and infused breath into it. He had prepared a set of competent actors and singers to carry it on further. He received laurels and honours. The honours given to him by the Kanchi Kamakoti Peethadhipati filled him with

gratitude. Andhra Nataka Kala Parishath, the premiere theatre organization honoured him in 1935, with P.V. Rajamannar and Gudavalli Ramabrahmam leading the team. They also requested him to present *Usha Parinayam*, with him as the Sutradhara and Vedantam Raghavaiah as Usha. The occasion was memorable. In spite of these honours, he remained a simple man.

Venkataramaiah called it a day in 1936 and completely stopped performing in 1940. He slowly withdrew from public life and would only explain things if his disciples came with some doubts. He spent his time in singing to himself the texts of the eight Yakshaganas he had so assiduously prepared. He would particularly recite songs from *Prahlada* and, with tears in his eyes call for Narasimha, the Lord : "Narsimha ! Lord ! My Protector! Take me to you." With those words on his lips, he passed away on January 6, 1949²³.

Chinta was a far-sighted man, not only with regard to the art form, but also in his family affairs. He treated his sons as his friends and never uttered a harsh word against them. Though the sons were quite accommodative, their wives developed misunderstandings. There was talk of setting up separate family units. The news reached ailing Chinta. He called for the three sons, the eldest having died sometime ago. He told them that they should not think of separating until his death. He had only a few days to live. He wanted them to be together until the first anniversary. He called upon them to celebrate the occasion for three days with a play every evening. The plays chosen by him were *Prahlada*, *Usha Parinayam* and *Rama Natakam*. The sons promised him that they would oblige and did so accordingly.

The three-day festival was a memorable event not only because the entire village was remembering Chinta, but also because the occasion sparked off thoughts about starting a school for Kuchipudi, a pride of the village. Further, Venkatarama Natya Mandali, a proud possession of Kuchipudi had its origins in the celebrations and the resultant transformation of "Chinta Vari Melam" into Venkatarama Natya Mandali.

Chinta Venkataramaiah's contribution

It is difficult to assess the major attributes of Chinta Venkataramaiah. He was called a "Guru's Guru," "Yakshagana Kala Samrat", a builder of an organization in which every Kuchipudi dancer- actor was a member at one time or the other and leader of exceptional brilliance. One would be wonder-struck as to the breadth of his activity, the depth of his knowledge and the heights of his achievement.

Chinta Venkataramaiah will be long remembered as the architect of the Yakshagana tradition in Kuchipudi and also the architect of the Chinta Vari Melam, which, immediately after his demise, became Venkatarama Natya Mandali, thus making this group as the oldest living troupe of classical Kuchipudi dance - from 1876 to the present day. It is no exaggeration to say that there was no contemporary Kuchipudi dancer-actor that was not his disciple!

Chinta, as a teacher, was exceedingly kind to his students. But he was also a strict disciplinarian when it came to performances. He would coax and cajole a boy rather than abuse him or insult him or punish him. In order to make a point clear to his student there was no time and place restrictions. He would go in the dead of the night, wake the boy up and correct his abhinaya²⁸ (if he went wrong during learning).

He treated his *sishtyas* as friends and shared with them the joys and sorrows of his profession. He made the open space before his tiny thatched shed his teaching place (he would joke about it as his 'palace'). There he would sit, cross-legged, with a small wooden block and another stick to beat the rhythm.

Perhaps to use the word "choreography" with regard to pre-modern gurus might be an anachronism since the word was not in vogue at the time. Chinta would not fit into the category of a director either, for he was doing much more than that. The German word 'Dramaturg' would suit him better. However, he was called, by one and all, the Nayakudu (leader) of the performing troupe.

Since all his actors went through rigorous training with him, he is a leader - teacher. As a man incharge of pre-production and production elements he was the supreme authority. He edited the text; allowed incorporations, substitutions and additions. He interpreted the characters; set the characters in motion. He was also responsible for their emotional rendering of dialogues; he was virtually incharge of all the aspects of *abhinaya* as of the entire production.

Venkataramaiah was an actor of high calibre. He started his career as Bhama, excelled in portraying the nuances in *padams*; was perfect in *laya* in *tarangam* enunciation: his dialogue delivery, as the village elders say, was immaculate. When he took up the job of producing yakshaganas he was satisfied with the saintly roles - those of Narada, Valmiki, Chandamarka, Vasishta and so on. This was because his troupe consisted of excellent actor - singer - dancers who fitted better in major male and female roles. Besides, he could not spend so much time doing a major role since he had to look after the production.

However, Chinta was known as a great actor: the humour in Chandamarka, the suppressed anger of Vasista and the serene nature of Valmiki and the sublime humour of Narada - he brought out all of them with finesse.

Venkataramaiah's directorial skills and expert handling of his actors are often outreached by his personal, endearing qualities. He befriended everyone. His loving and caring enquiries themselves won for him half his battle. He would call all the youngsters 'taata' (grandfather). He would call all others with a pet name 'Jakka' - a pet name he invented. Even in public contacts, this personal approach gave wonderful dividends. If he were staying for months together in someone's house performing in the nearby villages, he should make friends with the inmates of the house. When he left, the people in the house were in tears, requesting him to come back as early as possible. This is reported from Kollur, a village in Guntur district and such instances were many.

Chinta could ask anyone to take a role - all with a smile on his face; never effacing - as though he was asking for a favour.

He wielded such power because he was all the time ready to share his expertise; was never greedy; shared equilly with the others. intellectually and materialistically.

He was also a natural leader, artistically speaking. He saw the need for Kuchipudi to change. He wanted that everyone should go with him. When once the dream came true, he made every member a part of the enterprise. The system of sharing the remuneration money tells us how he was willing to give more to others than receiving.

Chinta played for his audience. After each performance, he would call his actors and discuss with them the pitfalls of a production and never grudged to alter his script or rearrange it for the sake of his audience.

His motto in life has always been: "we pay back to our benefactors (spectators or patrons) more than what they give. Only that way, they will be in debt to us and not we to them."

Chinta was a man of many parts, all amalgamated in perfect symmetry. A short man in stature, he was taller than many contemporary artists because of his humility and humanity; because he knew what he was doing and what was expected of him.

His insistence on clear and perfect diction and on the need to emote properly was due to the fact that he was himself a great actor and he knew the demands and nuances in each character's portrayal. His sense of "proportion" was superb. By intuition, he knew what fitted where.

A superb artist, an incomparable teacher, a man with a vision - personal as well as his community's, founder of a multi-nuanced theatre tradition, Chinta Venkataramiah is a synonym for "completeness". His contribution to Kuchipudi art is so worthwhile that he was rightly called "Natya Samrat" - only next to Siddhendra Yogi and perhaps Bhagavathula Ramaiah.

Vempati Venkatanarayana (1871-1935): The Lone Colossus



Not many in Kuchipudi today know much about the man who truly represented the best of Kuchipudi art in its hardest days and won laurels. Vempati Venkatanarayana, deservedly hailed as “Abhinava Satyabhama” and “Laya Brahma” does not receive the same kind of reverential approbation as the other two in the “Kuchipudi Dance Trio” - Chinta Venkataramaiah and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry - for the latter two have several disciples

who, time and again, remembered their gurus. Venkatanarayana had also had disciples, who were “gems” of their trade, but could not transform their private reverence to public avowal. This Kuchipudi veteran did not have even a photograph to show to the world that this was he !

However, Venkatanarayana blazed a luminous trail in the Kuchipudi dance firmament with his mastery over all the forms of artistic expression available for a dancer-actor in the later part of the 19th C. and early part of the 20th. He was considered a “Dancer’s Dancer” and was hailed for his ability to transport his audiences to great heights of aesthetic enjoyment. Poets, literary stalwarts and intellectuals were unanimous in extolling his proverbial abilities in female impersonation. In fact, he continued what was considered to be the best in the old time Kuchipudi tradition - incomparable expertise in *abhinaya* and matchless mastery over *raga* and *tala*, two qualities which are hard to find together in a dance artist. They are considered to be the high watermarks of excellence and they had found in him their most trustworthy lieutenant.

Born to Punnamma and Kodandaramaiah at Kuchipudi in 1871, Venkatanarayana had his dance training from his father. He had a beautiful visage, with large and expressive eyes and a high brow - all tantalizingly provocative for *mukhajabhirnaya*. He was agile and at no time put on weight as other Kuchipudi female impersonators did. All these physical qualities of demeanor were found to be a tremendous advantage to him, even in later years, to play the role of Bhama.

Venkatanarayana’s father, Kodandaramaiah, was a good Bhama actor himself, though not of extraordinary stature. He taught his son what all he knew and sent him for further studies to Narayanappa, who was known as a scholar-performer. Venkatanarayana had his initial performance at the Bala Tripura Sundari temple when he was twelve. Even this maiden performance of the Bhama kalapam astounded learned performers and laymen alike, for they saw in him a profound master of the art

and ‘craft’ of the kalapam. Elders ripe in the role wished him a great future and blessed him. He was so pleasing in his manners that already established Bhama actors gave him tips to polish his presentation. In another year, he grew into a stage performer along with his father, who took him to all places, to wherever he was performing. He started doing interlude pieces like *sabdams*, *padams* and the Bala Gopala *tarangam*.

Venkatanarayana was an *eka santhagrahi*, a person who would remember things *verbatim* when he heard or saw them once. This was of great advantage to him, especially when he insisted that he would accompany his father to the devadasi houses, where his father taught twice a week. Many Kuchipudi gurus who taught the devadasis or provided *nattuvangam* to their performances never allowed their sons to accompany them. Kodandaramaiah was also wary of his son’s request in the beginning, but allowed him after satisfying himself that Venkatanarayana’s keen observation and subsequent enquiries about the practices in dance were of an academic nature. He would often tell the devadasis : “Oh! I did not get your smile,” or “I did not use my tongue as you did” and was not satisfied until he got the gestures or movements or expressions right.

Kodandaramaiah was a better singer than a dancer. He taught his son what all a learner in Kuchipudi should learn. Further, his guru, Narayanappa taught him the *Abhinaya Darpana slokas* with explanation. He knew by heart all the *slokas* defining the *ashta-vidha nayikas*, the *hasta vinimaya slokas* and the definitions of *mudras* along with their *viniyoga*. These would have been sufficient for any young Kuchipudi dancer to make a considerably decent living. But Venkatanarayana insisted he should learn more. He saw his father was now teaching Golla kalapam to some devadasis. He was enchanted by it. He was hardly fourteen, but was ready for the heavy doses of philosophical truisms that the kalapam so ably essayed.

It was at this time that Kodandaramaiah came to know of a dance concert at Chodaya Palem, a zamindari village in Guntur

district. Chodaya Palem, like Nangigadda in Krishna district, was a place known for its expert devadasi dancers. The occasion was the honouring of a dancer called Chinna Rani and her teacher by the local zamindar. Kodandaramaiah, accompanied by his inquisitive son, went there. Chinna Rani's expertise in sangeeta, sahitya and nritya was greatly appreciated by the pundits of the court. But what struck the father and the son with wonder was the accompanying mridangist, a septuagenarian called Mahankali Seethaiah. He was a performer in his younger days at Kuchipudi and migrated to a small village, Dhulipudi, in Repalle taluk of Guntur district. Seethaiah settled in the village because he inherited some property there. Seethaiah stopped performing and took to teaching dance to devadasis of Repalle and Chodaya Palem and had earned a name for his expertise in mridangam. Pundits present on the occasion praised Seethaiah's *laya* and *tala vigjnana*¹.

Both Kodandaramaiah and Venkatanarayana were mesmerized with the *laya jnanam* of this old man. Seethaiah recognized Kodandaramaiah and enquired about his son's dance education. Kodandaramaiah, repeating what his son had exclaimed during the performance, requested Seethaiah to take his son as his *sisya*. Without listening to any objections, Kodandaramaiah left his son there to be groomed by this savant, Seethaiah. Seethaiah's grandson, Mahankali Satyanarayana of Dhulipudi village², who was himself a well-known mridangam player would often talk about this event that happened in their family : that the famous Kuchipudi dancer, Vempati Venkatanarayana learnt the nuances in *laya* and *tala* from his grandfather. As we have to rely on such legends from Kuchipudi and other places, this also needs our consideration and further research.

Venkatanarayana was with Mahankali Seethaiah for more than an year and had mastered the *tala* system. In later years Venkatanarayana excelled all his colleagues in the rendering of *jatis* and he gained this expertise from his guru, Seethaiah. Venkatanarayana, fortunately for us, recorded some of his *jati*

creations which are found in his manuscript copy of Bhamakalapam text, handed over to Peda Satyam and a copy of it, I believe, is in Guru Chinna Satyam's archives. It will be a valuable text for all lovers of Kuchipudi if it is published. Venkatanarayana became proficient in both the kalapams as well as in the *jati* system and its intricacies. Mahankali Seethaiah used to play on the mridangam and would ask his disciple to dance to its syllables, thus performing a kind of *jugalbandi* which strengthened the *sishya's* ability for *jati* formulations.

By 16, Venkatanarayana became a busy artist performing, independently, in temple festivals and in several functions arranged during other celebrations. By word of mouth his excellence as a Kuchipudi artist was known all over central Andhra. But Venkatanarayana was not satisfied. He wanted to learn the other *vesha kathas* - Balintha *vesham* and Dadinamma *vesham*. Every dancer-actor who was doing Bhamakalapam and Golla kalapam was also doing these *vesha kathas* previously, for they put the dancer's abilities to test under excruciating conditions. While Balintha was popularized by his seniors like "Balintha" Ramaiah, Dadinamma was not an ordinary dancer's cup of tea. Very soon Venkatanarayana mastered both. Perhaps he was almost the last Kuchipudi dancer who became proficient in all these areas.

Balintha *vesham* is about Devaki Devi's birth pangs when she was giving birth to Sri Krishna. The way she suffers as a pregnant woman, the way she, like any other woman, curses her husband for having committed her to this fate and how she could be relieved of her pains soon was the subject of this *vesha katha*, which ends with a lullaby (*laali pata*) sung to put the child Krishna to sleep, a modified version of Annamacharya's famous song.

Balintha *katha*, as any other Kuchipudi art form, is a pointer towards the attitude of the Kuchipudi visionaries with regard to mythological stories and their contemporary relevance. Though the 'balintha' in the story is Devaki Devi who gave birth to Sri Krishna, she stands for every woman in similar circumstances.

Thus the individual story is elevated to be of universal significance. The ‘balintha’ (which means ‘a woman who has given birth to a child recently’) and her pangs of suffering and her curses showered on the absentee husband remind us of similar happenings in every household any where in the world. Likewise, Satyabhama stands for every woman, quarreling with a lovable husband in a fit of anger, but pines for him everafter. If Satyabhama stands for emotion and intuition (she is uniquely sensitive, self-assuring, quick-tempered, but passionately in love with her husband), Gollabhama stands for reason, cool intellect and is argumentative. In fact, they are the two sides of the same coin and combinedly represent the woman, nay, represent any human being. This “universalization process,” perhaps, is the key to the continuing popularity of the Kuchipudi stories generation after generation and it gives the stories contemporary relevance.

Such a common human experience can also be found in Dadinamma *vesha katha*, which is about a lady in distress and her outcry for help. This *katha* depicts the story of a young royal woman who is forcibly carried away by a villain and is tied down to her bed and is kept in a lonely house in the midst of a forest. Her *angika* curtailed, she has to depend on her voice, her eyes and her hands to denote her utter helplessness and seek for help. This lady, Leelavati, daughter of king Bhoja and his queen, Manavati was kept in a lonely palace specially constructed. After she was forcibly taken away and kept in secret confinement, she narrates her story and seeks divine help. Very few Kuchipudi artists could really move the audience in the enactment of Dadinamma and among them Venkatanarayana stood supreme.

Some recent critics mistook another Vempati Venkatanarayana, from among the Kuchipudi families, who was a dramatist to be the dancer Venkatanarayana and attributed to the later theatrical qualities of stage design and composition, but, in reality, they are different individuals³. The dancer, Venkatanarayana’s father was Kodandaramaiah and the dramatist

Venkatanarayana's father was Nagesam. The dancer was born in 1871 and the dramatist in 1877. Such mistakes of identity are common in Kuchipudi families because of a tradition of giving the grandfather's name to the grandson. If there are three grandsons in a family, all of them may be christened in the same way. The mistaken identity of the two Venkatanarayana-s arises from such a predicament.

From 1890 to 1930, Venkatanarayana toured the entire state and must have given more than three thousand performances. It is no exaggeration to say that there was no village festival or a zamindari function that was celebrated without Vempati's active participation. Though he was equally proficient in all the forms of Kuchipudi repertoire, he came to be identified more with Bhama kalapam, and was hailed for his performance as Bhama in which role he excelled all earlier Bhama actors⁴.

Contemporary poets and discerning critics have given us detailed accounts of Venkatanarayana's Bhama *vesham*. With his tantalizingly sonorous voice, with his alluring demeanor, his agile movements, his chiselled expressions of *viyoga sringara* through *mukhjabhinaya*, he was able to transport audiences to the heights of *rasa* experience each time they witnessed the performance. Puranam Suri Sastry, the first authoritative critic of Telugu dramatic arts, belonging to the early decades of the 20th C. has this to say about Venkatanarayana's abilities to create *rasanubhuti* each time a *rasika* witnesses his performance⁵ :

Great dancer-actors like Vempati Venkatanarayana, by carefully and yet meaningfully following *sastraic* tenets create the proper *rasa* by progressively elucidating the necessary *sthayi* and *sanchari bhavas* and express them after carefully denoting their use at proper emotionally-related points in the progression of the story and critically applying them to the *nayika's* changing mental conditions so that the *angika* and *sattvika*

abhinayas are interwoven with ‘clinical’ creativity to interpret the *vachika*. This synthesis of the text, its inner significance as interpreted by the performer through the various and appropriate *abhinayas* would help a spectator to experience aesthetic enjoyment each time it is presented, unlike the contemporary presentations.

According to Suri Sastry, Venkatanarayana’s portrayal of the character of Bhama is thoroughly based on the tenets of the *sastra*, his interpretative abilities perfect on all counts, and they are used in a progressively relevant and technically perfect methodology. In lesser artists, it becomes mechanically repetitive (“as in contemporary presentations,” as he says) and in great artists of creative excellence they become aesthetic experiences.

Sista Ramakrishna Sastry, a Professor of Telugu at the Madras University and an ardent historian of Andhra’s dance and dramatic arts, who had seen Venkatanarayana’s performances in the twenties at Machilipatnam during his college days recalled⁶ the haunting experiences of the great maestro’s recitals, with his scintillating and vibrant, yet delicate movements, his ogle-eyed looks oscillating between deep sorrow, and heights of happiness, with his moving voice modulation and, of course, his proverbially bewitching smile! Sastry likens Venkatanarayana’s performance with that of the celestial dancer, Urvasi. Quoting from a poetic text of the 19th century - Jakkana’s *Vikramanka Caritra* - in which the poet describes the qualitative difference between the recitals of two dancers in the court of Lord Indra - Rambha and Urvasi - and, according to Jakkana, Rambha’s dance followed the rule-book, so to say, technically perfect; but Urvasi’s recital was aesthetically more enjoyable because of its creativity ! Venkatanarayana’s dance performance was always such - simple yet elegant, rule-adherent but always creative and enchanting !

Ramakrishna Sastry also emphasizes that the veteran performer’s main stay was his voice. According to him there were

as many strands of variance in his voice as would be the *prasthanas* in *swara*. The performance could be enjoyed even with eyes closed because each tenor of the mood of a situation is reflected in Venkatanarayana's voice modulations! Nowhere did he see such a perfect synchronization of the movement and the mood, the mood and the reflecting textual significance. Venkatanarayana's unsurpassing mastery of the *tala* system made his *jati* rendering sharp and evocative, ending up with the final *konagolu*, which carried the audience to a mood of exhilaration.

Sista particularly lays emphasis on the beginnings of Bhama kalapam. The very act of placing the plait on the curtain as a challenge to those who would like to compete with her and the elaborate description of the plait and its significance followed by her *pravesa daruvu*, "Bhamane ... Satya Bhamane" These were enacted by Vempati Venkatanarayana exhibiting several shades of pride, with the whole gamut of *bhavas* following one after the other with quick succession which could be taken as the 'content page' of the whole kalapam performance.

As Ramakrishna Sastry describes, the preliminaries take a full three hour duration after which the Bhama performs the *Dasavatara sabdam*. Written by Siddabathula Rangadasu⁷ of Pedapulivarru in Guntur district, this *sabdam* has been in the Kuchipudi repertoire since the early decades of the 19th C. and is often given to a young dancer to give him confidence. But Venkatanarayana would do this himself because, according to him, this was paying his tributes to the Lord for having given him the opportunity of serving Him - the Lord of the Ten Incarnations.

Viswanatha Satyanarayana, a distinguished poet and Jnanapeeth Awardee, wrote a whole chapter on Bhama kalapam in his memorable historical novel, *Ekaveera*⁸. The excruciating movements of *viraha* that disturbed the heroine's psyche in the novel indirectly suggests the impact of Bhama kalapam on the viewers. Though he did not mention the name of the Bhama performer as Vempati Venkatanarayana, everyone who belonged

to that age would know to whom the poet was alluding. It was so because Vempati made such an impact on Viswanatha. That Viswanatha lost no opportunity to witness a Kuchipudi performance was noted down by his colleague and friend, Jalsutram Rukmininatha Sastry, a literateur of distinction, who said that he and Viswanatha did not mind standing all through the performance of Bhama kalapam, he himself listening to the critically appreciative comments made by the former⁹.

Viswanatha's definitive critical voice, in fact, extends to a critique of the general emotive nature of Bhama kalapam. He says that there are only three great poets in India who rightly projected the exact *alambana vibhava* of Satyabhama : Jayadeva in his *ashtapadis*¹⁰, Mukku Timmana in *Parijathapaharanam*¹¹ and Siddhendra Yogi in Bhama kalapam. Among them, Thimmana is a poet and Jayadeva is a *bhakta*. But Siddhendra Yogi is not only a poet and a *bhakta*, but also a *jnani*, a real *yogi*. While Jayadeva's *bhakti* reflects Chaitanya Maha Prabhu's intuitive involvedness of a distinct consciousness pining for its amalgamation with universal consciousness, Siddhendra, by making Satyabhama and Sri Krishna partners in the *alambana vibhava*, into which he brought in the essence of the *alamkara sastra*, stressed a philosophical point : while Jayadeva described the union of a distinctly individual consciousness into the universal one, for Siddhendra the two "consciousnesses" are not separate; they are split temporarily and would reunify certainly, thus emphasizing the 'advaitic' nature of Siddhendra yogi's *magnum opus*.

Venkatanarayana's Gollabhama *vesham* received encomiums in equal measure. Especially noteworthy was his rendering of verses, tactfully alternating his tone between high seriousness and ironic undertones. It was a thoroughly enjoyable experience when the bhama's elucidations from the scriptures are delivered without a demur of irony, alternated by her repeated excuses for confronting such a great scholar and *karmishti* - the

later part said with an appearance of seriousness, but accompanied by an ironic half-smile that spoke the real truth of the intended mockery. Among the contemporaries, Venkatanarayana was the only one who could show serious intent in one eye and mischievous ironic thrust in the other.

Another scholar-critic, Jalasutram Rukmininadha Sastry testifies that Venkatanarayana had no equal either in the two bhama *veshams*, or in Dadinamma. His words would sum up what contemporary intellectuals, scholars and critics thought of Venkatanarayana's eminence as a dancer-actor¹²:

In my younger days Vempati Venkatanarayana used to play the bhama *vesham* in Bhama kalapam with great fervor and ingenuity. The *daruvu* - 'Ne tala lene ...' - still lingers in my ears. His Dadinamma *vesham* exhibited a masterly control of movements, still conveying the agony of a stratified soul. That certainly was the work of a superb artist. If I close my eyes, I see him in that role. It haunts

Venkatanarayana had a *melam* performing yakshaganas for a while. The demand came from his patrons, especially from rural Andhra. Since his performances of kalapam were a 'must' in temple festivals, the priests pleaded their inability to 'book' another team separately for performing yakshaganas. They persuaded him to present at least a couple of yakshaganas along with the kalapams. He obliged them for two to three years and stopped doing so saying that everyone should do his own work and should not usurp other's work-space. It was to one of such performances of *Bhakta Prahlada* that Viswanatha Satyanarayana referred to in his mammoth novel, *Veyi Padagalu*¹³. The entire process of the performance until the early hours of the next day, followed by the Bhagavathulu's tour in the village was vividly described by him. Viswanatha was never weary of extolling the Kuchipudi art and more so Vempati Venkatanarayana whom he considered the living

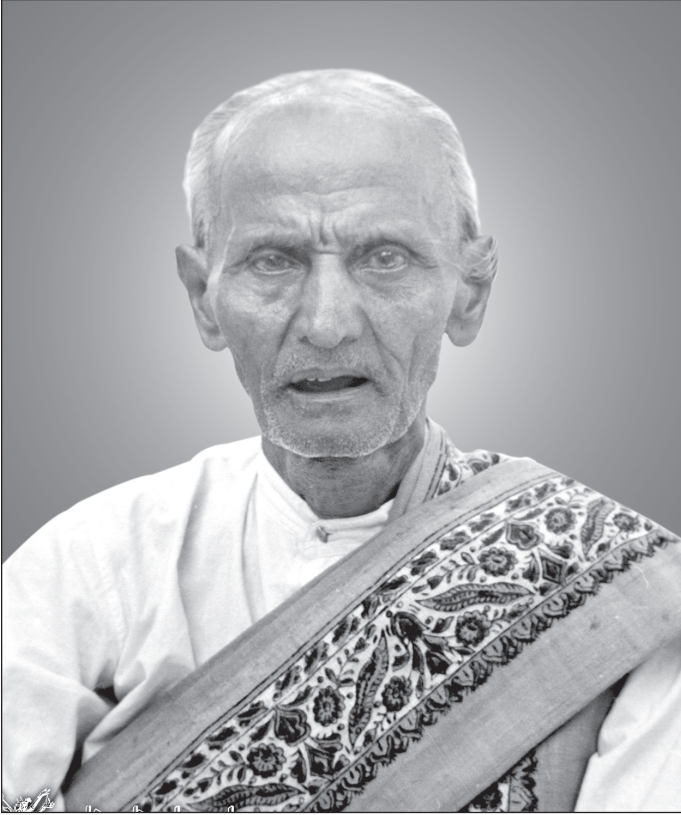
legend of the essence of Andhra's dance culture.

Venkatanarayana was a complete dancer-actor. There was no faculty of dance art that he did not master. A dancer with exceptionally evocative *sattvikabhinaya*, with unparalleled musical virtuosity, his mastery of *laya*, his agile *angika* made him an ideal performer, not easily equalled, let alone excelled. For almost half a century his name was synonymous with Kuchipudi. Numerous honours came in search of him. Zamindars and landlords vied with each other to have his performances during the major festivals. He was honoured with the titles "Abhinava Satyabhama" and "Laya Brahma." Stories abound with regard to his expertise in *abhinaya* and *tala vijnana*. It was, in fact, put to test on one occasion by no less a scholar than Adibhatla Narayana Das, the doyen of Harikatha. He was so astounded by Vempati's mastery of *laya* that he requested the young performer to allow him to accompany him on *nattuvangam* for his kalapam the next day. An unprecedented occasion in the annals of Kuchipudi history! Vempati lived up to his reputation and Adibhatla's expectations! The old man took Venkatanarayana into his arms and anointed him with the title, "Laya Brahma.¹⁴"

In spite of his heavy schedules, Venkatanarayana devoted considerable time teaching his disciples. "Natya Kalanidhi" Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, the initiator of the solo dance tradition in Kuchipudi, owes his expertise in abhinaya solely to his guru, Vempati Venkatanarayana. Chinta Rama Murthy, Chinta Radhakrishna Murthy, Bhagavathula Laxmi Narasimham and Pasumarthi Viswanatham - each one a master in female impersonation, were his disciples. Later day dance exponents like Vempati Peda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavaiah revered him as a father figure.

This great dancer-actor passed away in 1935, in the same year the present generation's great dancer-actor of Bhama *vesham*, Vendatam Satyanarayana Sarma was born, Siddhendra yogi thus blessing the continuation of Kuchipudi's hereditary excellence!

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry (1886-1956) and the Solo Dance Tradition



Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, the doyen of today's Kuchipudi dance, was a legend in his own life time. People of Kuchipudi, including his own disciples, were evasive, slippery and inconsistent when his personal life was referred to because they knew very little about it. He moved in and out constantly even in his youthful days, and in the old age hardly came back to the village. Young boys desirous of learning from him went to him, wherever he was. If he was visiting a place at the invitation of some patron or disciple, local gurus, dance students and even enthusiasts who would like to be initiated into dance, saw to it

that he prolonged his stay for a longer time so that they could learn from him or see him perform. He ungrudgingly shared his expertise with them, performed where connoisseurs gathered and imparted training without any class and caste discrimination.

Laxminarayana Sastry - His Life and Times

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry (1880-1957) is the third in the Kuchipudi Quartet whose foray into "Vyastha Nritya" (solo dance) turned out to be a boon both to himself and the Kuchipudi art itself. Born to Ramesam (also called 'Venkatesam' as his father called him so due to an oath taken in the name of Lord Venkateswara) and Savitramma in 1880, he studied dance under his father earlier, but became the first student of Vempati Venkatanarayana. Elders who knew both say that they were very close to each other since the age difference between them was only nine years. Sastry learnt Bhama kalapam from his guru, as all other *sishyas* did in Kuchipudi and started giving performances. He also accompanied his guru both for nattuvangam and also to do single solo items if time permitted. Good gurus always promoted their dearest *sishyas* like this. So did Venkatanarayana. He was married meanwhile and after a lapse of some years joined his guru again to learn the other kalapams. His experience with his guru, his travels with him all over Andhra must have both assured him and cautioned him - 'assured' because he could do well as his master told him repeatedly and 'cautioned' because if his master was in the field, there was no chance to anyone else, not even to him.

Laxminarayana Sastry was, at an early age, exposed to the *mejuvani*, the devadasi dance. The *abhinaya* of the devadasis attracted him, some of them having been trained directly by Kuchipudi masters themselves or by their disciples spread over the land. He found that their 'styles' were akin except that the *abhinaya* of expert devadasi performers was always in favour of a little *hastabhinaya* and more of *sattvikabhinaya*, more specially *netrabhinaya*. In a more romantic atmosphere, they went into performing, and experts among them had also specialized in doing *abhinaya* for *slokas*. The Kuchipudi and devadasi traditions, though

apparently looked diverse had common sources of influence – the *Natya Sastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*. It is commonly believed that the Kuchipudi Art belonged to the Bhagavatha tradition and the devadasi art to 'Karnatakam'. In one way, one catered to the general public and the other to the discriminating few. Laxminarayana Sastry, having specialized in Bhama kalapam, was more akin, performatively, to the *lasya* style.



Vedantam in the role of Bhama

He was also exposed to the Thanjavur style of Bharatanatyam, having toured the South early in life. It was said that he went, after his marriage, in search of fortunes, to the South and was greatly disappointed for not being able to study under a guru in Thanjavur. Details are not known, but his disappointment turned out to be a boon to Andhra and to Kuchipudi art. Dance anthropology suggests that group activity in creative expression was a rural preoccupation and the more individualistic it became, it became classical and catered to sophisticated or educated classes. In South India the devadasi classical tradition was for long considered to be serving a selective few. Sastry saw quite a number of Bharatanatyam dancers and was impressed. Their repertoire was different having had a fixed system and orderly presentation of the compositions. He also must have found soon that both 'Karnatakam' and Bharatanatyam were female-oriented dances, the former's repertoire depended on the clientele, whereas Bharatanatyam, which originated from the 'sadir' dance, was

creating its own model of a fixed repertoire. The difference, perhaps, is not qualitative; it is contextual. There was yet another difference: while Bharatanatyam developed a large repertoire of *varnams* which demanded more of *jati* transposition, the 'Karnatakam' had limited *jati* inclusions. His trips to other parts of Andhra and the South must have brought into Laxminarayana Sastri's mind all the possibilities of *abhinaya* and *tala* in the South Indian dance traditions. When he came back to Kuchipudi after the soul-searching experiences, Laxminarayana Sastry started learning Golla kalapam and other forms. He also started teaching some devadasis. This was not merely "teaching". One should say it was more an "interaction" between two traditions and both were beneficiaries.

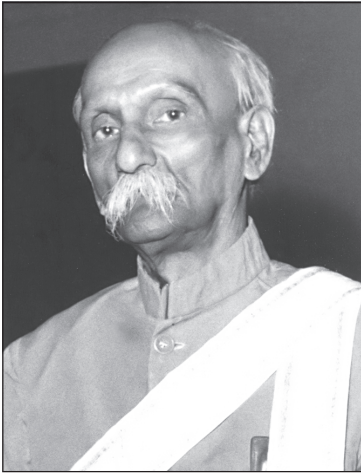
During his sojourn to *samsthanams*² for performances, Sastry was also asked to teach the devadasis of the *samsthanams*. Along with them, their teachers also wanted to learn from Laxminarayana Sastry. It was C.R.Acharyulu, who came from the temple dance tradition who heard of Vedantam's expertise in *abhinaya* and wanted to be his disciple. The year was 1937 and the *samsthanam*, Nuzvid. When Vedantam returned to Kuchipudi after a few months, Vempati Peda Satyam, by then an accomplished 'Bhama' actor, joined him to study under him - the 'items' as they were called.

It was at this point of time that Vedantam decided to plunge into the untrodden field of 'solo' dances. He slowly gathered materials for building up a solo repertoire to teach his students. Thanks to his guru and his own inquisitiveness Laxminarayana Sastry acquired a mastery of Telugu classics, the *pada* literature, the *kritis* of Tyagaraja, the Sakuntalam *slokas* and the *Adhyatma Ramayana keertans*. He already knew how *padams*, *javalis* and *slokams* from *Amarukam*, *Pushpa Bana Vilasam* and *Krishna Karnamritam* were used for *abhinaya* in the native traditions by temple and court dancers. The kalapa tradition itself had some solos incorporated in their plays, partly to fill in the time and partly to initiate new dancers. The *Dasavathara sabdam* and *Damera*

Timmendra sabdam were part of the Kuchipudi repertoire. In addition, it uses *tillana*, the most important one being in *Prahlada*, sung by Prahlada, the boy (“Daanambu, Saadhanambu neevenani.....”) between one punishment and the other. Similarly, the Matangakanyas in *Harischandra* dance to either a *jati swaram* or a *javali*.

Peda Satyam, Sastryji’s first student, was joined by Ayyanki Thandava Krishna, and a little later by Vedantam Raghavaiah. Thandava Krishna was an enthusiastic amateur. Both he and Peda Satyam literally made their master build up a rich repertoire consisting of not less than 100 different compositions. The accumulation of these compositions as a repertoire was another great achievement of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's scholarship and wide cultural and classical bias.

It was not enough for Laxminarayana Sastry to develop the repertoire; he should develop a 'style' of his own. Meanwhile his third son, Jagannadha Sarma became his student. He and Thandava Krishna made a good pair. New compositions were needed. With his Telugu literature background, Thandava Krishna was also helpful. With a full twenty to twenty five items, Thandava Krishna and Jagannadha Sarma started on a tour to Hyderabad, Pune, Bombay and other towns under the direction of Sri Sastry. It needed - besides solo items, duets as well. So he remembered the last episode of Bhamakalapam after Krishna entered. He completed two duets - "Radha-Krishna" and "Siva-Parvati", both of them great hits during their northern tour. There was also an improvement of the compositions, structurally. Both Radha-krishna and Siva-Parvathi started with a *padam* or a song and incorporated a *sloka*m in Sanskrit, a *dandakam* or a *chulika* and then came back to the *pallavi* in Telugu. This 'composite' structure, with different varieties of compositions was made more popular by his disciples later. This suggested that Laxminarayana Sastry had specific artistic goals to achieve. On another side, Peda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavaiah, paired together and started giving performances in Madras and all over the South, later on adding some of their own.

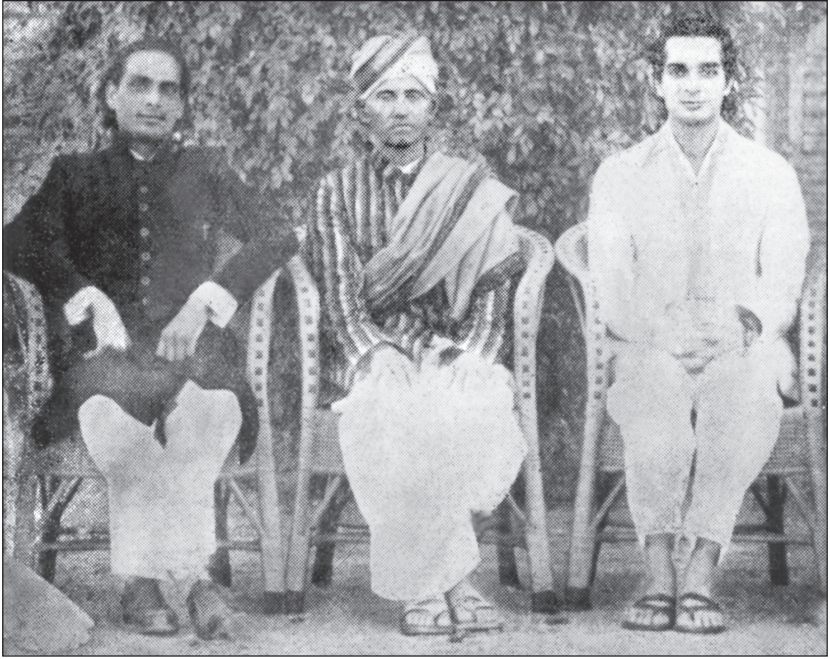


Prof. Vissa Apparao

During this time Laxminarayana Sastry was interested in the *padams* of Kshetrappa. He must have been taught these by his guru, Vempati Venkatanarayana, the monarch of *sattvikabhinaya*. He must have acquired it during his acquaintance with the devadasis or during his exposure to Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam dancers in those days knew quite a few Telugu *padams* and *javalis* and employed Telugu *pada* singers to teach them.

Balasaraswathi learnt them from Balakrishnan. Gauri Ammal learnt them from Padam Ponnuswamy. The Telugu devadasi *kelika* tradition contained rich *pada* literature. Even by 1944, Vedantam was considered to be a specialist in the *abhinaya* of *padams*. Subsequent incidents proved his interest right. He developed love for demonstrations. He supplied commentaries on their performance method to Prof. Vissa Apparao and was specially honoured for his proven expertise in *pada* abhinaya. During all these days of groping in the dark and finding flashes of hope, he was on the move, visiting various places in Andhra and outside Andhra³ and taking new students both from Kuchipudi and outside - all of them only men, until 1944.

Uday Shankar, the internationally-reputed dancer and choreographer attended a presentation of Bhama kalapam and Dasavataram performed by Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry at Sagar Talkies, Hyderabad on January 13, 1942. He was so enamoured of the alacrity and the gestural beauty of Sastryji's *abhinaya* that he requested the Guru to visit his Almora Centre and give his teachers and students the pleasure of this great classical dance style.



Vedantam with Uday Shankar and Ayyanki Thandava Krishna

Due to the long and successful tours of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, Thandava Krishna and Jagannadha Sarma on one side and Peda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavaiah on the other, young people in Kuchipudi found abhinaya attractive. Many of them studied from established gurus like Chinta Venkataramaiah, Bhagavathula Vissayya, Tadepalli Peraiah Sastry or even Yeleswarapu Seetaramanjaneyulu who taught music, but they also wanted to study 'solo' dance items from Sri Laxminarayana Sastry because they would like to be equipped in both the areas. Hemadri Chidambara Deekshitulu, Prahlada Sarma, Chinna Satyam, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma and scores of others now joined him either for a short while or on a long term learning process.

While teaching them in Kuchipudi and moving out for performances quite frequently (he used to stay for three to ten months at a place, giving performances in all the neighbouring

villages and towns with headquarters at a hospitable place, as he found one at Tenali or at Gudivada), Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was offered a job in the newly started Azad School at Machilipatnam, started on nationalist lines (it later became the Jaihind School and then National College) as a dance teacher. A dance teacher's job in a school is a new phenomenon in Andhra and he was the first such teacher.

When young male disciples joined him to learn *pada abhinaya* Vedantam was to deal with a delicate issue of teaching *lasya* compositions predominantly to males, whose style of presentation would be different. He was already toying with the idea of enrolling some girls into learning dance. There were a couple of abortive experiments in this direction both at Nuzvid and Muktyala. His first female student was from Nuzvid, a daughter of Sri Mrutyunjaya Sarma. But she did not continue for long. At last a willing teacher and not so unwilling a student joined together - Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and Kanchanamala. The year was 1944.

Rangamani, who became a professional doctor later and Kanchanamala who ended up as a Bharatanatyam teacher at Tirupati were the younger daughters of Dr. Maringanti Seshacharyulu⁴, a practising doctor with a liberal mind and Smt. Seetamma, who was endowed with an artistic temperament. Both the girls became Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's disciples. He went on teaching the girls for several years with intermittent and long gaps.

Sastry was fond of travelling. His performances and, later, his demonstrations became frequent. He would go to Gudivada, for example, and stay there for several months. Connoisseurs awaiting such an opportunity arranged performances. Josyula Seetarama Sastry, a long-standing disciple and an able singer would be summoned to sing. His uncle Bhagavathula Subbarao played on the mridangam. In those days violin was not yet in use. Harmonium used to be the accompanying instrument and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's second son, Srirama Murthy played on the harmonium.

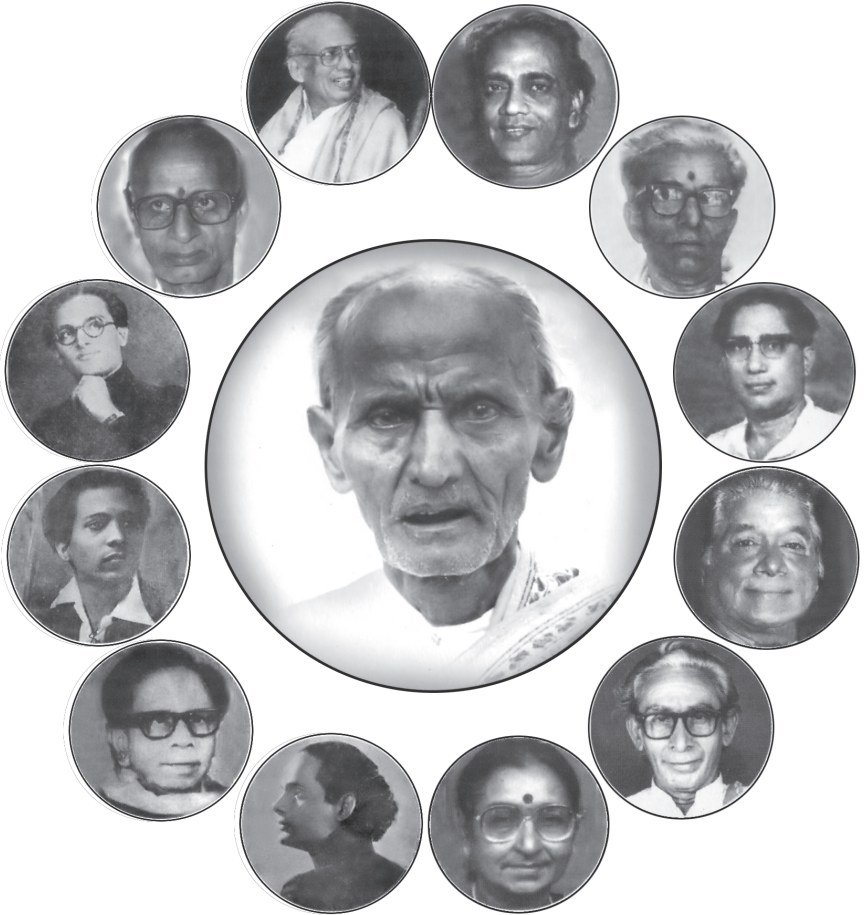
Events followed quickly. There were more women learning *Pada abhinaya* or 'solo' dance than men. Laxminarayana Sastry went to all the places in Andhra - to Eluru, Gudivada, Rajahmundry and Tenali keeping his base at Machilipatnam. By now Jagannadha Sarma occupied his father's place in the school. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was consolidating all his findings into 'course work' and taught to Kanchanamala and then to Sakuntala at Gudivada, to Andhra sisters at Machilipatnam, to S.R.Y. Rajyalaxmi at the same place and Manorama and others at Rajahmundry.

Meanwhile honours came his way. The Andhra Nataka Kalaparishath honoured him in 1945 for his artistic contributions. The Madras Government and the citizens of Madras honoured him with a Simha Talatam and the title "Kuchipudi Natya Kalanidhi" in 1948⁵. He was honoured at Vijayawada, at Visakhapatnam and at Movva and at each town in Andhra. The Kshetrayya festival at Movva in April 1951 was a memorale event



P.V. Rajamannar honouring Vedantam

**Some Important Disciples of
Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry
who became prominent Gurus**



Clockwise from bottom left :

Ayyanki Thandava Krishna, C.R. Acharyulu, Vempati Peda Satyam,
Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma, Josyula Seetaramayya,
Vempati Chinna Satyam, Nataraja Ramakrishna, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma,
Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Korada Narasimha Rao,
Yeleswarapu Nageswara Sarma and Uma Rama Rao

because very distinguished scholars, poets, researchers and performers saw his demonstration of *Pada abhinaya* with awe-struck veneration. So did Rajamannar, E.Krishna Iyer, Prof. P.Samba Murthy, Balasaraswathi and others at Madras in 1948. The attempts of the visionary were bearing fruit.

Laxminarayana Sastry, at the invitation of Prof. Vissa Apparao, went to Visakhapatnam to demonstrate *Pada abhinaya* and explain the intricacies in them, when Nataraja Ramakrishna and his disciples Uma and Sumathy (later Uma Ramarao and Sumathy Kaushal) took advantage of his stay there to sharpen their artistic acquisitions. In one of his visits to Eluru, Korada Narasimharao learnt a few items from him.

The last days of Laxminarayana Sastry were not altogether happy. He continued to stay at Machilipatnam and to teach Akhileswari, daughter of C.V.R. Prasad, a man with a fine artistic sensibility and with an envious background of Shantiniketan, Bombay, Almora and Trichur. In his search for the best Kuchipudi teacher for his teenage girl he found Vedantam Laxminaranayana Sastry. The family understood his idiosyncracies, accepted his small demands and looked after him as their own 'innocent old man' of the household, as was done earlier by Dr. Maringanti Seshacharyulu and Cheruvu Sreeramulu.

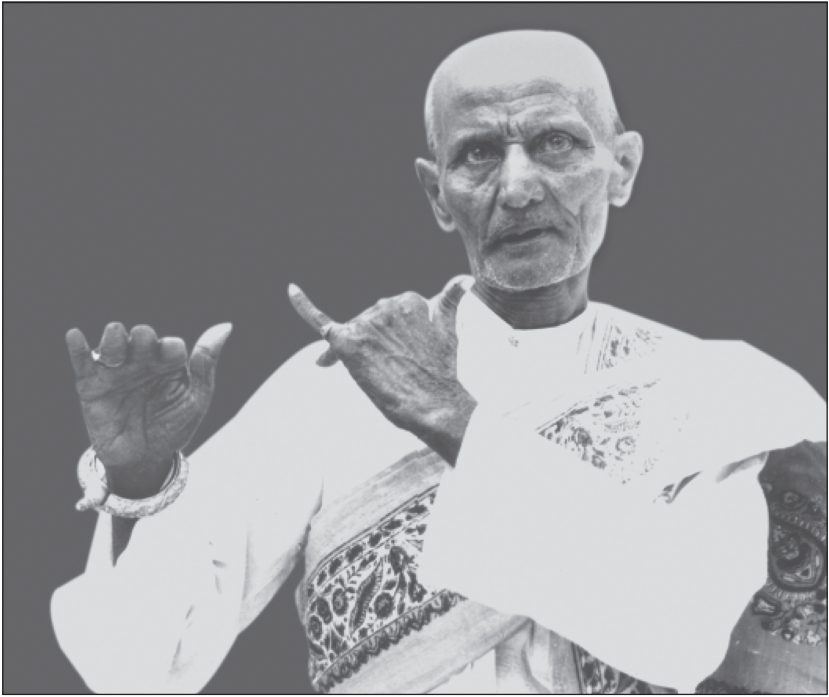
Akhila was to be his last student. He started teaching her at Machilipatnam. He moved to Madras when Akhila went to her parents at Madras. While in Madras for almost two years, several luminaries in the field of dance learnt from him. Balasaraswathi openly acknowledged her indebtedness to him. Ramaiah Pillai, Gauri Ammal, Ramaiah Pillai's son Chamaraj and many others were benefited by the expertise of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry. He joined Akhila in Hyderabad when the family shifted. But fate had willed it otherwise; within fifteen days of his arrival at Hyderabad, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry breathed his last, on July 13, 1957.

Solo Repertoire

The most fascinating part of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's artistic sojourn was his astonishing consolidation of different compositions, quite dissimilar to each other. It had *Puja nrityam*, *Padavarnam*, *Varnam*, *Swara Pallavi*, *Jati Swaram* and *Javali* into a repertoire that was followed by himself and his students for generations. These were followed by a *sloka* and Tyagaraja *keertana* and *Adhyatma Ramayana keertana*, *tarangam* and *asatapadi*. There were Sanskrit, Telugu, Tamil, Hindi and even Marathi songs. The invocatory song, for a long time, was a Marathi song ! The variety would astonish even Pundits ! To lay hands on such a large number of compositions, based on their dance-worthiness must be a herculean task. In addition, look at the amazing variety !! *Padams*, not only of Kshetrayya, but also of a number of others dominate the list, and understandably so. The consolidation of the texts of compositions, their choreography (of over 150 different items), building appropriate *jatis* to each one based upon their emotional and rhythmic components is the work of a genius and a giant. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry is both. Further, he is a visionary. All these qualities are happily assimilated in him because, as an ideal teacher, he combined in him the qualities of precept and example, theory and practice, conceptualization and execution. This could nowhere be better seen in two important aspects that engaged his attention in his life - *abhinaya* and writing 'Performance Manuals' for *abhinaya* - the practice and the theory.

Abhinaya

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's attitude towards *abhinaya*, especially of *padams*, extendable to all other items, is basically to depend on a combination of *angika* and *sattvika*, with secondary importance to *vachika*. *Vachika* is there - and an important one at that. But in reality the performer must bring out the *bhava* through expression of emotions. When once the parameters of the *sthayibhava* are fixed, indicating the nature and type of the heroine (*sweeya*, *parakiya* or any of the *ashtavidha*



nayikas), now an elaboration of the *sattvika* -based *angika* follows. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was adept in emoting a *bhava* and employing several *mudras* in quick succession to suit the *bhava*. A myriad *hasta mudras* to suggest a single idea, single person and to evoke a single impression.

Pada-abhinaya usually relates to a heroine pining for her lover. If this is enacted by a male performer, he can only create an imaginative reality. It is a mental and psychological identification with the *nayika*. The textual connotations evoke the *bhava*. The initial *sattvika bhavas* determine it and the multiple *angika* movements - in this case the gestures - vivify the *sattvika bhava*. The heroine is pining for Muvva Gopala ; her agony is narrated in the text. *Mukhajabhinaya* established it. *Hastabhinaya* elaborated textual minimization into maximization. ‘Muvva Gopala’ can be shown in thirty different mudras, each time evoking a different image, but each image relating to Gopala. The text is just two

lines. The elaboration of the abhinaya in interpreting the two lines might take any amount of time, depending on the interpretative genius of the dancer.

In this case the performer is becoming the commentator - a commentator in “gestural cognition”. If Muvva Gopala stands for the lover Krishna and his multifarious denotations become the base on which contextual references are built (Gopala is shepherd, plays on the flute, he is Govardhanodhari, etc.) the performer is creating multiple analogues for a single image. Through his encyclopaedic richness of the language and its connotative gestures, he interpreted and commented on the cultural models Indian tradition had upheld for centuries.

One can argue that *Padams* are exceptionally suited for such type of creating expanded gestural language, but Laxminarayana Sastry extended this strategy even for *keertans* and *slokas*. What he was trying to do, in other words, was to expand not merely the ‘sign base’ of dance language, but also the cultural base of the society since he dances the entire Bhagavatham in a *Gopika Geeta* or the entire Ramayanam in *Parsurama Garvabhangam*. This is not merely aesthetic enjoyment; it is aesthetic education as well.

Jaatakam* (‘Horoscope’) of a *Padam

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry is also to be credited with supplying a performance manual for each one of the compositions he set for choreography. He called this *jaatakam* (‘horoscope’) of the song. The *jaatakam* contains a thorough description of the type of heroine chosen, the basic *rasas*, the *avasthas*, the *vibhavas* and *anubhavas* - all to be described through each one of the words. What type of emotion is signified by a word and concurrently what *hasta* to be used? This is almost a word-to-word description, in gestural idiom, of the imagined performance. He taught his students in this method. This helped all his disciples to become able teachers because it is the right way to teach how to choreograph a given text.

Not that it is entirely new. In our shastric models, we have a sloka or a poem being commented upon : with a word-to-word meaning (*artham*) followed by a general summary (*tatparya*) of the central theme and a comment on the *alankaras* and so on.

Even in dance the *sloka abhinaya* is embedded in several layers of expression : *padabhinaya*, *arthabhinaya*, *vakyabhinaya*, *bhavabhinaya*, *saareerabhinaya* and finally *sampunabhinaya*.

But at a time when these in-depth practices have died away, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry has revoked them as a pointer towards learning to understand the text in terms of the performance, leading to choreographing.

In a note on Balasaraswathi learning *abhinaya* from Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, N. Pattabhiraman, founder - editor of that illustrious journal *Sruti*, quotes a conversation between Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and Balasaraswathi⁷ :

She (Balasaraswathi) studied later with Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry to gain new insights into *abhinaya*. Sastry was an expert in the interpretation of *padams*. He spoke his own idiom. He would



Vedantam teaching Bala Saraswathi

ask Bala "Can you do this varnam ? How would you cast its horoscope?" Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai wasn't greatly impressed by Sastri's musical abilities, but Bala was quick to appreciate his creative imagination. She tells us how Sastry commanded her to "cast the horoscope" of a Todi varnam one day. "I did it without any repetitions. He responded by asking me to give it up and stick to *padams*! "They're your family's heritage," he said and "with some-one like your mother singing padams, you can have the whole world in your hands."

Sastry would arrive early mornings, covered in a green shawl; he would spend hours teaching Bala. He taught her songs from Bhama kalapam and many other items.

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's contribution to Kuchipudi art is both intensive and extensive. He not only introduced the practice of presenting individual items in a systematic way, but also built a huge repository of items for the use of the practitioners. One can write a whole thesis on the nature of these selections and their relevance to dance education and to cultural education as well. They are so rich in their sahitya and so varied in their emotional content. He introduced girls into dance and became the visionary leader of contemporary Kuchipudi dance world. He practised the classical mould and popularized the art through an artistic intuition shown in choosing what was dear to the Telugu psyche. He fixed the parameters of a performance by giving the practitioners a large variety to select from. He also designed the first ever costume a female Kuchipudi dancer should wear : the spreading folds of a pattu saree with the traditional pallu' coming upside down and the jewellery, including the waist - belt, used in Bhama kalapam. What he got stitched for Kanchanamala is the dress to-day's female dancers of Kuchipudi wear, with minor variations !

As a man Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was simple, innocent and not avaricious. His needs were few. In a situation where his health cautioned care, he took quite a few students. He was a good teacher, always desirous of a hopeful future for his disciples. As a performer he was excellent - to be placed in the ranks of the greatest dancers of his time. His performances, as contemporary reports indicate, were raving. His teaching, endowed with sympathy and care, looked for new methods. His *abhinaya* knew no comparison ! His *konagolu* and *jati* elaborations were embedded not only with *laya* but also with *bhava*.

Kuchipudi owes its national fame to him as it owes to Chinta Venkataramaiah's innovations earlier. By constantly touring, demonstrating, performing and teaching he kept the Kuchipudi flag high. He brought to himself laurels of established mastery of the art, but also brought laurels to Kuchipudi art by blazing a trail - new, innovative, and creative.

A rare kind of a genius, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry will be remembered as long as *vyastha nritya* (Solo Dance) tradition of Kuchipudi continues to be a prominent mode in dance recitals.

Jaatakam

(Performance manual / Horoscope) of a *Padam*

(Prepared by Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and published in *Kshetravya Padamulu*, edited by Prof. Vissa Appa Rao and published by Andhra Gana Kala Parishad, Rajahmundry⁸, Prof. Rao called it 'abhinaya paddati' : Performance Method)

Padam : *Okka Saarike Ilagayite*

Ragam : *Mohna* : Adi talam.

Nayika : Saamanya, atrupta, Praudha, desirous of
conjugal union

Samyoga Sringara ; Hasya rasa

The nine bhavas to be acted all through the padam are :

Srama, Autsukya, Chapalata, Glani, Supti,

Jadata, Dainya, Vishada, Vitarka

The vibhava, anubhava, sattvika bhavas as occasion demands should be shown.

*Okka Saarike Ilagayite - oho Idemiti ratira?
srama helana vitarkam autsukyam rati-s

** Makkuva Deerchara Muvva Gopala ***
autsukyam

Sokkiyunna Nee Sogasadi**** Yemira! ||Okka||
glani, dainyam, chapalata vitarkam, dainyam

Nemmogamuna- Nee- badalikalemira-
dainyam srama vitarkam

Neetukaada rom nadire-demira?
sogasu srama vitarkam

Kammani vaatera kandina demira?
Dhriti vitarkam

Kaallunu chetulu tada ba du temira? ||Okka||
dainyam srama vitarkam

Kannula niddura gammedemira -
supti vitarkam

Galamuna chamatalugaare nemira?
srama vitarkam

Tinnani paluku baluka vademira?
gadgadam srama vitarkam

Telisi teliyakunnavademira?
jadata vitarkam

Inapuri muddula muvva gopala
autsukya

Yepuna nanu galisitiveevela
harsham moham

Manamuna ninne nammiti jaala
autsukyam

Maaru balkakunna-vadi yela?
vishadam glani vitarkam

||Okka||

Samyoga Sringaram :

(The following, hastabhinaya to be shown at each point)

*** "Okka saarike"**

1. gaja 2. dhenu 3. kukkuta 4. vrischika
5. hamsa 6. Naga-paasa 7. Gandabherunda
8. Chakravaka 9. dhanu 10. padmasana

**** "makkuva"**

1. Upachaaramu 2. Paalu (milk) 3. Phalahara
4. Gandharri 5. Tambulam 6. Attar 7. Panneer
8. Pushpam 9. Sayya 10. Alankaram

***** " Muvva Gopala "**

1. Govardhanadhari 2. Seshasaayi 3. Vanamaladhari
4. Kalingamardana 5. Kamsamardana 6. Vatapatrasaayi
7. Laxmivallabha 8. Venu naadam 9. Kuchela Rakshana
10. Gaja rakshana

****** "Sogasu"**

1. Aalingana (2) 2. Chumbana (5) 3. Kalalu (5)
4. Kachakarshana 5. Kuchakarshara 6. Pandhamuttu

These are to be shown as occasion demands.

Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu (1901-?) :
A citadel of musical strength



Kuchipudi dance art demands that each actor sings his own songs and poems and renders his own dialogues. Sometimes, even the prose dialogues are rendered in a musical way. This very special quality insists that an artist should be an actor, dancer and singer - all in one. Further, all these qualities must be of high quality because it is through songs and dialogues that characters are signified. Great actors, in every generation, have proved to be high-profile singers.

Unlike what happens in dance-dramas today wherein the dancer is divorced from the singer and both of them are divorced from the dialogue speaker, the old-time actors enjoyed a fulsome acting career which demanded that they should be fine singers, besides being able actors and dancers. In a performing art form

with an emphasis on the spoken word, the musical voice has a crucial role to play.

It is in this sense that unlike actors in other forms of dramatic art, a Kuchipudi dancer is a 'complete' actor who needs to equip himself with all the artistic means - music, dance, dialogue and expression. We come across at least one or two such all-rounders in each generation with different levels of excellence and the best among them are the best in the world of performing arts.

Music has always been at the centre of Kuchipudi dance art. Usually it is learnt hereditarily. The father taught the necessary dance movements along with the proper rendering of songs so that the young actor can sing the *daruvus* in the traditional and established way. But, in course of time, people realized that unless one acquires a minimum knowledge of classical music, on which Kuchipudi music is based, he cannot be a perfect actor. It is not merely the dance music alone that is needed. There are several types of metrical compositions including complicated metres like *kandardhas* and *seesaardhas*. Thus a whole gamut of musical knowledge is required to master the kalapams and the dance dramas.

There were several music teachers in earlier times that helped the Kuchipudi artists in procuring such musical knowledge. Some of the gurus and choreographers of dance dramas approached teachers in the neighbouring towns for help. Sometimes people went out to study music and after coming back became significant actors. But the one maestro, a resident of Kuchipudi, who remained in the village to teach music, in spite of alluring opportunities outside, was Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu, who provided dance training an expert musical strength. No other teacher had this distinction of teaching music to four generations of dance students.

The musical lore of Kuchipudi is no less magnificent than its dance lore. In mid-18th century, Hari Ramaiah, a veena artist

and Yeleswarapu Subbaiah, a vocalist, enthralled the courtiers and music lovers in the court of the Mysore Maharajah. Elders in the village talk about the episode as though it happened only the other day. (Such was the historical sense of the Kuchipudi artists who easily mix up the past and the present into a universal continuing time!). They say that one Veena Sambanna, the court musician of the Mysore durbar, unwillingly listened to Ramaiah playing the veena and was so 'taken in' that he immediately got the consent of the Maharajah so that Hari Ramaiah gave a concert and was properly honoured by him.

Many of the yakshagana artists used to be trained by Challapalli Seetharamaiah, a veteran musician in the lineage of Tyagaraja, who resided at Machilipatnam. He was a great asset both to the directors (sutradhara) and artists and never said 'no' to any aspiring Kuchipudi dancer-singer. Vedantam Venkateswarlu and Varanasi Brahmaiah assisted the melams whenever they needed musical help. But the man who stood like a tower of strength and stayed in Kuchipudi in spite of several invitations from outside was Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu, whose contribution to the success of Kuchipudi performances is never properly acknowledged.

Born as the eldest son of Yeleswarapu Kanakadurgaiah and Seshamma in 1901 at Kuchipudi, Seetharamanjaneyulu had his formal school education in the earlier part of his life and was later initiated into music. This branch of the Yelleswarapu family was music loving. His father, Kanakadurgaiah was a well-known 'Taranga kalakshepam' singer whose *swara prasthanam* and knowledge of *laya* and *tala* were inimitable. He died in the year 1940 and left a void in the group singing traditions of Andhra Pradesh. His uncle, Yeleswarapu Ramakrishnaiah, was a *Vaggeyakara* of great merit and the songs he composed on the deity of Kuchipudi, Bala Tripura Sundari, reflected his spiritual attainments. Into this musical family was born Seetharamanjaneyulu, perhaps to serve the traditional yakshagana art of Kuchipudi.

Seetharamanjaneyulu passed his Matriculation examination from the National College High school, Machilipatnam. He also passed his “Praveena” examination in Hindi. As the father was initiated into music and attained a status of excellence, he wanted his son also to learn music. The teachers chosen were Challapalli Subbaiah and Seetharamaiah, who belonged to the lineage of the Tyagaraja tradition, and were direct disciples of Susarla Dakshina Murthy, a veteran and much revered vocalist. Seetharamanjaneyulu had a thorough grounding in music, especially under the younger one of the Challpalli brothers, Seetharamaiah and learnt it, in the true ‘gurukula’ way, for ten years and worked for a couple of years as an apprentice under them and was declared by the gurus as having attained full proficiency.

The young man, groomed now to be a professional singer, was so fond of his village that he never wanted to settle down elsewhere, however much was the temptation. He belonged to a family in which the native deity of Kuchipudi was worshipped as their family diety. Thinking that he could move around to any place staying at his village, looking after the parents, the lands and worshipping his diety, Yeleswarapu stayed behind. This became an asset to the entire dance village.

Besides, his decision proved to be a great asset to the local artists, who were not satisfied with the ‘Natya Sangeetham’ learnt in the traditional way at home. They now moved far and wide, saw the world outside and realized that only if they learnt Carnatik music from a classical musician, it would put them in good stead in the world outside. In fact, Chinta Venkataramaiah, a worthy musician himself, sent his two young sons, Rama Murthy and Krishna Murthy to learn classical music from Seetharamanjaneyulu.

When the young Chintha brothers publicly displayed their musical talent even when they were playing the roles of Kusa and Lava, the whole Kuchipudi knew what difference would that make to have classical music training to sing the songs and poems in the

yakshaganas and kalapams. After this event, every one in the field of dance in the village was a disciple of Yeleswarapu! Besides the Chinta brothers, Vedantam Sambaiah, Prahlada Sarma, Satyanarayana Sarma, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, Bhagavathula Seetharama Sarma, who later served the Chennai - based Kalakshetra as a musician and also as a teacher in their school, Pasumarthi Seetharamaiah who migrated to Visakhapatnam, Bhagavathula Satya Sundararama Sastry who was a singer in the Venkatarama Natya Mandali repertory, Bhagavathula Ramakotaiah (Hyderabad), Josyula Seetharama Sastry (Vijayawada), Bhagavathula Ramatarakam (Kavali), Lanka Annapurna, Vanasri Jayarama Rao (New Delhi) and many many more were his disciples. By any conservative estimate, he would have taught about four hundred artists of Kuchipudi alone.

One of his disciples, who later won laurels as a vocalist and violinist of great potentialities, Kocharalakota Suryaprakasa Rao remembered two endearing qualities in his guru : excellence in teaching methodology and humaneness : to look after each disciple as his own son. Rao also testifies that he gave free shelter and free food to many poor students and his house used to be an old time *gurukula ashram*, where devoted students spent most of their time in musical discourses.

Seetharamanjaneyulu was a much sought-after music teacher in the two art-centred villages of Kuchipudi and Movva. It looks all the more astonishing since several of his contemporaries in Kuchipudi itself were great singers. This list includes Bokka Seetharamaiah, Vedantam Ramakrishnaiah, Vedantam Venkatachalapathi, Tadepalli Perayya, Vedantam Ramaiah and Bhagavathula Kutumba Sastry and many more. This speaks of Seetharamanjaneyulu's expertise in teaching as well as his easy availability at any time during the day. P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, who was a devoted student of the master, endorsed that they were always eager to reach his house early in the morning as they were looking for the time to go to the 'garidi' of Chinta Venkataramaiah. Though younger by several years, Seetaramanjaneyulu earned the love of his young disciples as did Chinta Venkataramaiah.



Seetharamanjaneyulu in a concert on a Srirama Navami Day at Kuchipudi

Seetharamanjaneyulu had, since childhood, a spiritual bent of mind and engaged himself in singing Tyagaraja keertans or the keertans from *Adhyatma Ramayanam*. His annual Sri Rama Navami festivals drew huge crowds and attracted noted musicians who would come ‘free’ to participate in devotional singing. He usually made it a point to sing as the last participant in a week-long programme. He did this for two reasons, as his disciples would say : firstly because musicians and music learners from far off places come to sing in the festival and he should give preference to them. Secondly, by singing as the last of the musicians, he could sing to his heart’s fill and his ‘mangalam’ was said to be very sentimental when he would call Rama to come again next year to save the mortals.

Seetharamanjaneyulu was also a well-known Haridas, whose rendering of stories like “Krishna Leelalu” and “Bhakta Ramadas” were extremely popular. He sang the *keertans* of Ramdas day in and day out and he would find an appropriate quotation from Ramadas for any occasion in life. Since morning till late night his avocation was to teach when students were around

or take a tambura and sing to his soul's fill the songs of Tyagaraja, Ramadas and the *keertans* from *Adhyatma Ramayanam*.

Seetharamanjaneyulu's generosity knew no bounds. He gave food to needy students. He gave money to needy parents. He imparted education to one and all, but free to needy boys and girls of all castes and creeds. He had a store of old family songs of all types including *bhajans* and *mangala haratis* and he would teach these songs freely to women.

A noble soul on any count, whose unassumed backing helped the Kuchipudi artists to gain strength and make a mark in the field of dance music, he also assisted the Venkatarama Natya Mandali by accompanying the kalapams and yakshaganams on harmonium, as he was an expert harmonist as well. And his *kucheri-s*, especially in Veda Sabhas and annual festivals were a great draw and his Tyagaraja and Rama Navami festivals were known for their purity of purpose and intensity of devotion.

References

Introduction

1. "Natya Mela" is a male dance tradition whereas "Nattuva Mela" refers to the female dance tradition. The former contained group productions and the later solo performances, mainly explicating romantic songs.
2. *Sabdam* is a poetic composition written in native metres, with end rhyme and is set in the *chaturasra gati*. Used in *nritya abhinaya*, *sabdam* is an excellent tool for the presentation of rhythmic songs. *Tarangam* is mostly *nritta*-oriented and is set in *madhyama* and *drita kalam*. *Padam* is a composition with an equal emphasis on *sangeeta*, *sahitya* and *nritya*. An excellent medium for *sattvikabhinaya*, it contains a *pallavi*, *anupallavi* and *charanam*. *Javali* is a tilting erotic song.

Chinta Venkataramaiah

1. This equivalence of "koodu, gudda and needa" to the three artistic needs of *bhava*, *raga*, and *tala* was Venkataramaiah's favourite analogy. Interview with Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, on 8th June, 1988 at Eluru.

2. Venkataramaiah used to call his small thatched house as "my palace". He enjoyed sitting on the threshold of the Verandah, teaching the students, who sat on the "nadi veedehi", (centre of the road) the road before his house. Mentioned in the "Interview with Sri Pasumarti Venkateswarlu" and Interview with Smt. Chinta Seethamma both recorded on 28-12-2007 and 29-12-2007 at Kuchipudi.
3. Hari Madhavayya (1854-1918) was born to Peramma and Sriramulu and known as a prodigy. Innovative and dashing, he was himself a superb performer, besides inspiring several youngsters in the field.
4. Venkataramaiah had two elder brothers - Venkataratnam and Radhakrishna Murthy and an younger brother Narayana Murthy. All of them were closely associated with the development of the yakshagana tradition in Kuchipudi.
5. The story is based on hearsay because of lack of evidences. Chintalapati Laxminarasimha Sastry attributes to Hari Madhavaiah the credit of adopting the yakshagana form. See his *Kuchipudi Bhagavatulu*, 1983, pp. 274-275. Anuradha Jonnalagadda follows this account and Arudra's to say that Madhavayya toured extensively and was influenced by Melattur Kasinathayya and Venkatarama Sastry's yakshaganas. See her *Kuchipudi Dance : Who is Who*, 1993. p. 58. I have followed the eye witness account who was present when the history was being made. No records are available to prove either this or that account creditably. Also see, Arudra : *Samagra Andhra Sahityamu*, Vol. VII, 1990 : pp 399-401.
6. Though early records mention that only Vedala Tiru Narayanacharya's *Prahlada* was taken up for production, Vedantam Pravateesam was sure that the Kuchipudi *Prahlada* was based on two texts, i.e. Vedala Tiru Narayanacharya's and Tiruvalikkeli Ramanujacharyulu's. See his *Prahlada Natakamu* (1981) p. ii.
7. My theory is based on the analogy of a worldwide phenomenon of the evolution of classical art from simple to complex forms. History also tells us that in the initial stages yakshagana was a single person's singing of a story. "Harikatha", a single man's dramatic narration of a story was termed by the maestro Adibhatla Narayana Das., as "yakshagana". Naturally, the one-actor narration grows into actor - questioner duo's (*Samvada*) explication of a theme in a systematized argumentation. But, when a story is to be visually presented - not merely an explication of an idea - the yakshagana as a dramatic mode evolved.
8. For the early history of Yakshagana, see S.V. Joga Rao, *Andhra Yakshagana Vangmaya Charitra*, 1961.

9. The contribution of the Nayaka and Martha kings to the art of Yakshagana is discussed elaborately by Dr.S. Seetha in her authoritative work, *Tanjore as a Seat of Music*, Univ. of Madras, 1981.
10. After the fall of the Maratha Kingdom, patronage for yakshagana dwindled and enthusiastic amateur groups in villages continued it in their own rustic way. Side by side with the Court Theaters, rural theatre groups which were largely amateur and local, gradually got themselves formulated into caste-based performing groups.
10. That Chinta Venkataramiah produced three more plays was suggested by Chinta Ramandham, in his book *Kuchipudi Kalasagaram*, 1994, P. 54.
12. The Ms. of the text is not available.
13. While there are five *Rukmini Kalyanam*-s in yakshagana format written between 1890 and 1926, we are not certain whose work is taken up by the Kuchipudi Melam. While the authorship was attributed to the former by Chinta Ramanatham, my present version was based on my Interview with Pasumarthi Venkateswarlu. He says that he was 'with the camp' in 1914 during the rehearsals.
14. *Harischandreeyam*, a two-night performance of the Kuchipudi group achieved popularity in later years. This was a favourite play of the Melam especially after Vedantam Raghavaiah left for cinema and the Melam was yet to get an actor proficient in doing female roles. In those "lean" years, *Harischandra* was popular.
15. These dates are controversial. The year 1896 is a tentative one. I presume the play must have had its premiere by about 1886-87 since by 1899, it already had several performances to its credit. See *Andhra Patrika*: Tummalapalli Seetharama Rao's article "Kuchipudi Bhagavathula Melam", July 15, 1956.
16. A detailed study is to be made on the modalities followed by the Guru in formulating a "performance text".
17. References to Yogi Ramaiah are made by Bh.L. Narasimham's manuscript article, "Yakshagana Pitamaha Sri Chinta Venkataramaiah". The author has kindly sent me a copy of the article.
18. Bokka Kumara Swamy, son of Ramalaxmi and Sitaramayya, was a student of Varanasi Brahmayya in Carnatic Music and of Chinta Venkataramaiah in Yakshagana music. It was said he was an asset to Venkatarama Natya Mandali. That he started scoring music from *Mohini Rukmangada* onwards was referred to by Pasumarti Venkateswarlu in his interview.

19. Interview with Pasumarti Venkateswarlu.
20. The title is mentioned in *Andhra Patrika*, Jan. 14, 1949.
21. The *jati* formulations and their use as winding up tonalities of character - songs in Kuchipudi are to be studied from the point of view of a shift from the folk to the classical. A detailed discussion of the metrical forms used in Yakshaganas and their dramatic relevance was earlier done by Vedantam Pahlada Sarma. His interview recorded on 8.6.1988.
22. The list should include every dance - actor in Kuchipudi as everyone who took to dance between 1890-1936 was a disciple of Venkataramiah. This is only a select list of some notable performers - generation-wise.
23. 'Obituary' published in *Andhra Patrika*, Jan.,14, 1949. Smt. Chinta Seethamma, his daughter-in-law, vividly described these last days of Venkataramaiah with great feeling.
24. It is obvious that the Chinta vari Melam, the combined Melam of three individual family groups was started as early as 1876 when Venkataramaiah took over the leadership. Venkatarama Natya Mandali, of which Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma was a later president, is a continuation of the Melam with a changed name, the change occurred to commemorate Chinta's contribution.
25. This is corroborated both by Smt.Chinta Seethamma and Sri PVG Krishna Sarma.

Vempati Venkatanarayana

1. Puccha Subrahmanya Sastry, "Neti Natyamulu," *Kuchipudi Festival Souvenir*. Hyderabad : Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1959. pp. 55-57.
2. Mahankali Satyanarayana of Dhulipudi was a noted mridangist and contemporary of my father. He was never tired of narrating two stories : one, that their family originally belonged to Kuchipudi and second, that Vempati Venkatanarayana studied under his grandfather, Seetaiah. However, he had no personal knowledge of it.
3. The mistaken identity occurred due to Arudra's mention of the dramatist in his *Samagra Andhra Sahityam* (Vol.II), following an earlier poetic work, *Hymavati Parinayam* by Mantripragada Bhujanga Rao. This was also corroborated by Kuchipudi practitioners. Later scholars, including me, followed suit.
4. Venkatanarayana's manuscript edition of Bhama kalapam with the *jatis*

he practised was handed over to Vempati Peda Satyam. The kalapam is in Vempati Chinna Satyam's archives.

5. Puranam Suri Sastry, "Tataakullo Pachaarlu", *Natya Asokam*. Bandar : Vidya Nilayam, 1925, pp.56-57.
6. Sista Ramakrishna Sastry, *Andhra Nataka Charitra*. Madras : Madras University publication, 1973, pp. 88-89.
7. Siddabathula Ranga Dasu, a native of Pedapulivarru, Guntur district was the author of the *sabdam*. He dedicated it to Varadaraja Swamy. The *sabdam* was handed over to the Kuchipudi performers. See Chinta Ramanatham, *Kuchipudi Natya Visistatha*, p.123.
8. Viswanatha Satyanarayana, *Ekaveera*. Bezawada : Rasatarangani Prachuranalu, pp.151ff.
9. Jalasutram Rukmininadha Sastry, "Raju Vesham", *Andhra Patrika* (daily) dated March 9, 1941.
10. Jayadeva's *Gita Govinda* has been one of the major texts that the Kuchipudi people followed. It is also in the *madhura bhakti* tradition.
11. *Parjathapaharanamu* by Mukku Timmana, a court poet of Srikrishna Deva Raya, is one of the earlier texts that celebrated the love between Srikrishna and Satyabhama.
12. Jalasutram Rukmininadha Sastry, op.cit.
13. *Veyi Padagalu* is a mammoth novel depicting the cultural and social life of the Telugu people during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, highlighting the rich cultural heritage and the erosion of old time values. He gives a detailed account of the Bhama kalapam tradition of Kuchipudi and the rituals associated with it.
14. Chinta Ramanadham, *Kuchipudi Natyaacharyula Charitra Putalu*. Kuchipudi, 1988, p.25.

Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry

1. 'Karnatakam' is referred to the *lasya* style of dance, perpetuated by the women dancers of the temples and courts in Andhra.
2. *Samsthanams* : Small native states under the colonial rule.
3. Vedantam travelled to several places to oblige his present or future disciples. These tours outside the then Madras presidency took place when he travelled to Hyderabad, then in the Nizam State and to Poona (now Pune).

4. Maringanti Seshacharyulu, a great connoisseur of arts and letters was a native doctor from Machilipatnam in Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh. His daughters, Kanchanamala and Ragamani were Vedantam's students. Seshacharyulu was also an ardent nationalist, having written plays on the subject and also courting arrest.

The list of Vedantam's patrons should also include the name of C.V.R Prasad whose daughter Akhileswari was his last student.

5. P.V.Rajamannar, the then Chief Justice of Madras Presidency honoured Vedantam by presenting him with a "ganda penderam", a golden anklet, which is considered to be the highest honour for men of letters and artists.
6. Report of demise in *Andhra Patrika*, July 13, 1957.
7. N.Pattabhiraman, *Sangeet Natak* (72-73), April-Sept., 1974. p.27.
8. Prof. Vissa Appa Rao(ed.), *Kshetranya Padamulu*, Andhra Gana Kala Parishad, Rajahmundry, 1950. pp 69-70.

IV

Yakshagana : Early Exponents

Introduction

If a kalapam performance required a total number of five artists and musicians, yakshagana needed a band of actors who could stand up to the challenges to make the new venture a success. The success of yakshagana was as much due to their willingness to put in hard work as it was due to Chinta Venkataramaiah's amiability and his leadership qualities and Hari Madhavaiah's overall supervisory expertness.

Besides Chinta Venkataramaiah and Hari Madhavaiah, Hari Venkatachalapathy, the first robust actor who gave the *rakshasa* characters a rare identity, the three Chinta brothers and their progeny - Chinta Venkataratnam, Venkataramaiah's elder brother who inspired the entire team with sagacious leadership, Chinta Narayana Murthy, the first to don female roles in yakshaganas with sensitive portrayals and Chinta Audinarayana, Narayana Murthy's son who succeeded his father in doing the female roles, Bokka Seetharamaiah, Venkataramaiah's nephew who took all the lead male roles were the most prominent. Vempati Paradesi was the first child actor. He was later promoted to take the lead female roles. It was due to the co-ordinated effort of all these actors and master craftsmen that yakshagana remained popular for well over half a century. Those that had sown the first seeds are worth our gratitude.

Hari Madhavaiah

Madhavaiah was an elder contemporary of Chinta Venkataramaiah (1860 - 1949) and so belonged to the period, roughly, between 1850-1935. This Hari family, which was not

originally from Kuchipudi, came from Anantavaram of Guntur district in the 17th C. or early 18th C. and settled down here. Two brothers - Sriramulu and Ramanatham - who migrated to Kuchipudi made this their home. Sriramulu married Peramma and they had two children - Madhavaiah and Venkatachalapati, both having a highly successful dance-theatre career.

Madhavaiah started learning Kuchipudi at an early age, like all the other Kuchipudi boys and soon became proficient in Bhama and Golla kalapams. He had his own 'melam' with which he used to tour extensively. It was variously suggested that he was the man who saw a performance of yakshagana in the Thanjavur area when they went to perform there, and on a give and take agreement, taught the Thanjavur artists Bhama kalapam and got from them Usha Parinayam. Madhavaiah staged the play with himself as the sutradhara and his brother Venkatachalapathy as Usha and performed it. The first part of the story was retained by other scholars who said that Hari Madhavaiah saw the performance at Thanjavur and impressed by it brought the text to Kuchipudi and asked Venkataramaiah to take it up. Chinta Ramanadham¹ takes this view and attributes to Madhavaiah the credit of initiating the performance of not only *Usha Parinayam*, but also *Prahlada*. He choreographed both the yakshaganas, according to Natya Sastra specifications, trained his uncle Ramanatham and brother Chalapati in pivotal roles and thus became the first yakshagana *prayokta* in Kuchipudi.

These accounts, however, raise several questions. This story doesn't stand to reason for, if it were right, 'Usha' should have been the first play Chinta had produced. This was not to be so. The first play he produced was 'Prahlada'. Secondly if Madhavaiah was the progenitor of the Kuchipudi yakshagana, why call Venkataramaiah to be the 'Yakshagana pitamaha' ? Ramanadham found a solution by calling Madhavaiah 'Prapitamaha', whatever be the term's contextual validity is.

The third question that arises of these accounts is : Why have contemporary reviews neglected even mentioning the name

of Madhavaiah if the entire credit must go to him ? Where does Venkataramaiah fit into this ?

While the negligence of the Telugu people towards retaining historical data is sad, their negligence in the case of performing arts is deplorable ; in which case we could only depend on legends that were in circulation in Kuchipudi and earlier legends have a greater validity than the more recent ones. It is due to this reason that we should go back to the earliest (as far as possible) stories told about the ancestral practices. The account of the origins of the yakshagana in Kuchipudi was given to me in an interview by a 90- year old Kuchipudi harmonist - cum- actor, Pasumarti Venkateswarlu, whose association with the Chinta vari Melam was solid and long.

The first assertion, as he heard from his parents (who were contemporaries of Chinta Venkataratnam, Venkataramaiah's elder brother) was that the Chinta vari Melam camped at Nellore to perform when a rural 'Bayalata' team performed 'Pahlada' and the team witnessed it. Madhavaiah, the more dashing and entrepreneurial than the others, immediately suggested that they should also produce such yakshaganas! Venkataramaiah, initially, had some fear whether they could do such a big production. He was worried not only about the wherewithal of producing such a multi-charactered production, but also about the number of actors needed. The account as recollected by and as known to him through hearsay seventy five years ago (i.e., about 1930) runs like this² :

“During one such sojourn, Venkataramaiah, along with his brother Narayana Murthy and his friend, colleague and compatriot Hari Madhavaiah was camping at Nellore where Madhavaiah saw a performance of “Pahlada” by a local team. It was quite different from the type of performances they were doing. Madhavaiah was so impressed by the format of this yakshaganam that he immediately went to Venkataramaiah and insisted that they should do something like this. Venkataramaiah had all his doubts. ‘How could they jump into another type of stage presentation ? What

would they know about yakshagana presentation ? How would they be sure of its reception ? How would they manage to have so many actors to take up male and female roles ? Many questions - and no answers.'

“Madhavaiah, the wise man that he was, told Venkataramaiah that all things would take their own course and argued that they should make a sincere and concerted effort to start something like that. He also argued that their kalapams were for the intellectuals and to reach wider audiences, they needed a more lively and ebullient theatrical form. Venkataramaiah was at last convinced that they should do something in order to sustain people’s interest in them and agreed to Madhavaiah’s suggestion that they should also include some yakshaganams in their own repertoire. Besides, the musical theatre in Andhra at the time was rich, presenting mythological plays with poems and songs. Both Venkataramaiah and Madhavaiah thought that their performances of such plays with music and song and also dance would outbeat the stage plays”.

The result, as Pasumarthi Venkateswarlu recalled, was *Prahlada Natakam*. Madhavaiah was the inspiration and Venkataramaiah was the action and their togetherness brought the Kuchipudi yakshagana into a reality.

Madhavaiah lived as a bachelor and spent all his time in training young Kuchipudi boys as yakshagana actors. The seed he had sown had grown into a vast tree which gave innumerable Kuchipudi actors shelter. Among his many students Chinta Venkataratnam, his own uncle Hari Ramanatham and his brother Hari Chalapathi were prominent. With the demise of Madhavaiah, Chinta Venkataratnam took over the leadership of the Chinta vari melam.

The 'Chinta' Progeny : Chinta Venkataratnam, Chinta Narayana Murthy, Chinta Audinarayana

Each Kuchipudi Brahmin family has at least one well-known dancer in each generation. But the 'Chinta' family is blessed with several stalwarts within the same generation. Chinta Venkataramaiah, the doyen of the yakshagana tradition, though at the centre of this group, is preceded and succeeded by equally prominent dancers. Chinta Venkataratnam, Venkataramaiah's elder brother, Chinta Narayana Murthy, Venkataramaiah's younger brother, Audinarayana, the latter's son, Chinta Rama Murthy and Chinta Krishna Murthy, Venkataramaiah's two sons - the list is long and all of them were active in the performances of yakshagana. That all of them proved their mettle has been, indirectly, a boon to the yakshagana tradition of Kuchipudi.

Among all these, Chinta Venkataratnam (popularly called Rattaiah), son of Arundhatamma and Sivaramayya, was the eldest in the family who groomed his two brothers in the art of kalapam and, later, in the art of yakshagana. A noble soul, religious minded and, ritual-performing, Rattaiah was a yogi and both by his preaching and practice, inspired a whole generation of Kuchipudi people.

Rattaiah became the leader of the Chinta vari Melam at a very early age and became a worthy 'sutradhari' by teaching natya to a number of young boys in the village. He was mainly responsible for grooming Venkataramaiah as the "teacher *par excellence*" and handed over the leadership to him when he found him fit to take it up. He also trained his other two brothers, Radhakrishna Murthy and Narayana Murthy.

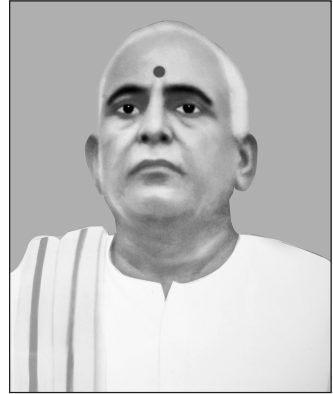
Chinta Narayana Murthy

Chinta Narayana Murthy, born in 1865, had his preliminary dance education with his eldest brother Venkataratnam and was one of the first generation yakshagana female impersonators.

Though he learnt Bhama kalapam from his brother and had given numerous performances as Bhama, he took to playing the female roles in all the yakshaganas in the 'melam', when the elders chose the new medium. He was the first artist to have donned the role of Leelavathi in *Bhakta Prahlada*. In later years, he took up the roles of the *rishi* (saint) characters like Narada, Valmiki and Vasishtha with equal nonchalance.

Chinta Audinarayana

Chinta Audinarayana, the first son of Narayana Murthy, succeeded his father in playing the roles of all the important female roles. He learnt the art from Chinta Venkataramaiah and Hari Madhavaiah, the yakshagana originators. He was especially proficient in playing the roles of *pativratas* (noble women) such as Seetha, Leelavathi and Chandramati. These two artists - Narayana Murthy and Audinarayana - set the tone for doing the female roles with the utmost sensitivity and understanding and have since become role - models to all the succeeding generations of Kuchipudi female impersonators.



In later years Audinarayana acquitted himself well in the roles of *rishis* as his father did. Contrary to the *sattvika* roles, his portrayal of 'Kalakausika' in *Harischandra* and the snake charmer 'Jantapuli' in *Prahlada* earned him fame. In the latter character, he even exceeded Chinta Venkataramaiah, according to contemporaries.

Hari Venkatachalapati

Venkatachalapati, born to Sriramulu and Peramma, was the younger brother of Madhavaiah, the inspirational source behind the initiation of the Kuchipudi yakshagana tradition. He was ten

years younger than Madhavaiah and was a contemporary of Chinta Venkataramaiah and so must have lived between 1860-1920. He was trained in the roles of all the *tamasa* characters by his brother Madhavaiah. The major roles he donned were Hiranya kasipa in *Prahlada*, Banasura in *Usha Parinayam*, Ravana in *Rama Natakam* and Viswamitra in *Harischandra*. For his role as Ravana, he was called “Lanka Raju” Chalapati.

A hefty man, seven feet high and well-built, Chalapati was one of the most loved Kuchipudi actors of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. His ‘Hiranya kasipa’ was particularly hailed by contemporaries as one of the most brilliant performances of the first generation yakshagana actors. He was ardently called ‘Abhinava Hiranya kasipa’. Originally, *Prahlada* was performed for three nights. Prahlada’s birth and his education formed the first night’s story ; the several punishments meted out to Prahlada occupied the second night’s performance and the third night contained Hiranya kasipa’s death. On the first two days, Chalapati was said to have had his food only once and on the third day, he would fast, and all through the day meditate on God Laxmi Narasimha and would not speak to anyone. And by the time it was dusk, he used to sit for his make-up.

From the moment of Narasimha’s appearance, Hiranya kasipa’s anger and ferocity increased by each dialogue and he was to be tied with ropes to keep him away from attacking his fierce foe. We have heard of and seen ‘Narasimha’ being tied down with ropes to control him but in this case it was done, as the story goes, to Hiranya kasipa.

The greatest quality in Chalapati playing Hiranya kasipa seemed to be his quick variance, in dialogue as well as body movement, changing from bitter anger towards his foe and utter affection for his son. The dual emotions shown by Chalapathi are recorded in an excellent article, “The King’s Role (“Raju vesham”³) in Kuchipudi yakshaganas written by Jalasutram Rukmininadha Sastry and serves as a factual document on Chalapati’s versatility.

The author had compared Chalapati's virtuosity to the slowly vanquishing *tamasa* and *rajasa* qualities in later actors. Sastry, in that article, particularly extolled the quality of the perfect assimilation of the *angika* and *sattvika* elements in Kuchipudi yakshaganas and especially in Hari Chalapathi.

The first members of the cast of *Prahlada* suited their roles in every respect according to Rukmininadha Sastry. Vedantam Chalapati's Leelavati was soft and often helped to aggravate the anger of Hiranya kasipa and Vempati Paradesi and later Chinta Audinarayana's Prahlada showed the very essence of the Bhagavata story. Chinta Venkataramaiah's Chandamarka and Hari Ramanatham's Narada with his fine singing voice made the play unforgettable to the contemporary audiences. Chalapati played the roles of Viswamitra and Virabahu in *Harischandra* with commendable credulity.

Rarely do we get actors of the calibre of Hari Venkatachalapati, a real gem of the Kuchipudi crown.

Vedantam Ramakrishnayya (1886 - 1940)

Born on March 31, 1886 at Kuchipudi to Vedantam Janardanayya and Parvatamma, Ramakrishnayya was equally proficient in the yakshaganas directed by Chinta Venkataramaiah as well as in stage dramas outside Kuchipudi. His well-built body, his stage-worthy demeanour, his versatility in rendering prose, poetry and songs, made him a unique actor of great potentialities. He started



learning dance at a very young age from his father Janardanayya, but later earned proficiency when he was trained by Chinta

Venkataramaiah. He also learned Carnatik music from a respected guru of nearby Machilipatnam, Challapalli Seetharamayya. It was remarked that both his gurus - Chinta and Challapalli Seetharamayya - vied with each other to gain the services of their disciple to their chosen field of activity, viz., yakshagana or music and he did not disappoint either of them for he joined the Chinta vari Melam under Chinta Venkataramaiah and when his work in Kuchipudi allowed him he was also taking part in musical stage plays which were very popular in the first three decades of the twentieth century.

Ramakrishnayya had an edge over several other dancer-actors of the day since he was well groomed in Sanskrit, having completed the *panca kavyas* at a very young age. This helped him to understand the characters better and deliver the inner meaning of the sanskritised verse with the correct expression of *bhava*.

Ramakrishnayya played the *dheerodatta* characters in all the Kuchipudi yakshaganas. He was Devendra in *Prahlada*, Aniruddha in *Usha parinayam*, Srikrishna in *Gaya natakam* and *Sasirekha parinayam*, Rama and Laxmana in *Rama natakam* and Dharmaraja in *Virata parvam*. But he was particularly well-known as Harischandra in *Harischandreeyam* for in this yakshaganam, his superb, yet controlled, rendering of the poems and songs and also the prose dialogues evoked great public reaction. It was said that not an eye was left without tears! He was specially known for evoking *karuna rasa*, through a halting, shiver-torn tone in such poems as “Arayan vamsamu nilpanegada vivahambu...” and “Mayaameya Jagambe nityamani...” which were extremely popular with the audience.

Even when he acted in the musical stage plays on contemporary stage, his Harischandra drew large crowds. His rendering of mukhari, kambhoji and sahana was always an instantaneous success and of the ragas like kedara gaula, kalyani, bhairavi, dhanyasi and thodi to evoke sringara rasa, was thought to be a special innovation on the stage; for he chose unusual ragas which were used to invoke other, quite contrary emotions by others.

Another important quality that made him a superb actor was his ability to demonstrate changing *bhavas* with an unusual control and ease and his rending of dialogues was known for its perfect timing.

Ramakrishnaya acted both in the earlier Chinta vari Melam under Chinta Venkata-ramaiah and later in Venkatarama Natya Mandali under Chinta Rama Murthy and Krishna Murthy. His devotion to his role - especially in understanding the role and the concentration and steadiness with which he played it everytime he went on to the stage earned him not only a great number of fans from the educated audiences but also won for him unprecedented number of awards. He was honoured by all the Zamindaris and by well-known associations all over Andhra. The Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured him in the Nrithya *sadas* at its Hyderabad session in 1964.



Vedantam Ramakrishnaya as Harsichandra and Prahlada Sarma as Chandramathi

An actor worthy of emulation with impeccable stage presence, sonorous voice, musical virtuosity and the ability to express the deeper meanings of the text is not very common on the yakshagana stage. Ramakrishnaya was one such. He passed away in June 1971.

Bokka Seetharamaiah (1885 - 1940)

A nephew of Chinta Venkataramaiah, Seetharamaiah was born in 1885 to Bokka Laxminarayana who married Venkataramaiah's eldest sister. He had his entire dance training from Chinta Venkataramaiah and at a very young age equipped himself with all the credentials of a committed yakshagana actor. Duty-bound and disciplined, Seetharamaiah became the centre of attraction in Chinta vari Melam and was one of the earliest actors who donned the roles of the heroes in Kuchipudi yakshaganas.

A true disciple, Seetharamaiah was also confidante of Venkataramaiah and was with him in thick and thin. He accompanied his maternal uncle-guru wherever he went and Venkataramaiah, in turn, loved him like his own son. A well-built man with pleasing manners, he often served as the de-facto manager of the melam. He was especially conscious of the peculiar predicaments of the team members when on tour. It was said that when the team camped at Jammi Golvepalli where it was rehearsing for *Sasirekha parinayam* written by Vallabhaneni Chowdari, a landlord of that village, everyone in the village thought he was the leader of the team and sought his help in supplying the necessary cooking needs and relied on him for the selection of the menu for food. When asked by Chowdari, the author, whether an extra *daruvu* was needed at a particular place, Chinta Venkataramaiah seemed to have jocularly commented that the matter must be judged by the chief manager, Seetharamaiah.

Seetharamaiah donned all the male lead roles and he was especially unparalleled in his portrayal of the *dheerodatta* roles such as Aniruddha in *Usha parinayam*, Rama and Lakshmana in *Rama natakam*, Krishna in *Gaya natakam*, Devendra in *Prahlada* and Rukmangada in *Mohini Rukmangada*. With an unrivalled, sonorous voice and a superb sense of the *tala*, Seetharamaiah lived up to the connoisseur's expectations in each role he played. His contribution in making the yakshagana acceptable by the general

public - both the educated as well as the commoners - was unique, for his voice and his rendering of the poems and the songs pleased them immensely.

Seetharamaiah's delicate handling of the hero's roles such as Abhimanya in *Sasirekha parinayam* and Arjuna in *Gaya natakam* (both roles are considered unattractive when compared to the more dominant characters like Banasura and Usha and Srikrishna respectively) won him laurels. His treatment of these roles elevated their dramatic importance. Needless to say that Bokka Seetharamaiah was taken as a model for laterday performers of the *dherodatta* roles such as Chinta Rama Murthy, Chinta Krishna Murthy and Mahankali Sreeramulu Sarma.

Seetharamaiah was an ideal Kuchipudi yakshagana actor, who could dance and sing and through dance and song and *abhinaya* enthralled a whole generation of dance-drama lovers. Seetharamaiah passed away in 1940.

Vedantam Ramaiah (1885 - 1945)

Among those that helped Chinta vari Melam's success of yakshagana performances, mention must also be made of Vedantam Ramaiah, son of Raghavaiah. He was born in 1885 and learnt dance from his father as well as from Chinta Venkataratnam. A friend of Venkataramaiah since childhood days, for both were disciples of Chinta Venkataratnam, he stood by Venkataramaiah in artistic and financial decisions and played most of the male lead roles like Sri Rama, Sri Krishna, Aniruddha, etc. He was more known as the sutradhara or the nattuvangam chief of the Melam and toured with the melam extensively. He passed away in 1945.

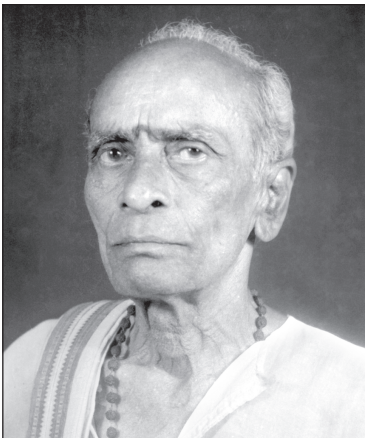
Vempati Paradesi (1880 - ?)

Several actors, accredited themselves in the Chinta vari Melam, also participated in Venkatarama Natya Mandali. Vempati

Paradesi, who was one such, was born in 1880 to Bhogamallu and had his dance training with Chinta Venkataramaiah. After joining the Chinta troupe in 1900, Paradesi took part in all the Melam's yakshaganas. He did children's roles and then women's roles and still later the roles of Harischandra, Rama, Laxmana, the washerman in *Rama natakam* and Devendra in *Prahlada* with great aplomb. A man well-built to suit the *dheerodatta* roles he was liked by both the elitist audiences and the commoners. Like several yakshagana actors he did not give importance to *vachika* and *angika* and, instead concentrated on the *sattvika* aspects of a character. As the great Poet - Laureate of Andhra, Viswanatha Satyanarayana said³, that if all actors emulate Paradesi's emotive expressiveness, Kuchipudi nay - the entire Andhra dramatic scenario - would be different. Perhaps he was one of the few actors who acted in almost all the male roles in *Rama Natakam*, big and small, with equal facility.

Paradesi stood as a towering personality in the history of Kuchipudi as an actor of great reckoning for his sensitive portrayals of the lead male characters.

Bokka Kumaraswamy



Several actor-dancer-musicians are to be credited for the success of the yakshaganas. Among the other important actors Bokka Kumaraswamy's contribution to the success of the yakshagana performances was credit-worthy. Though basically an instrumentalist accompanying the performances on violin or mridangam, Kumaraswamy's presence itself was a tower of

strength to the leaders of the melam. Son of Ramalaxmi and Seetharamaiah, he was a student of Varanasi Brahmayya, a well-

known musician of the time. He mainly belonged to the third generation of performers, but his work in the later part of the early phase is also important because it was he and his fellow disciple of Varanasi Brahmayya, Boddapati Sanjeeva Rao (from Mukkonda near Kuchipudi) that choreographed music for *Mohini Rukmangada*.

Some other early yakshagana performers

In the history of Kuchipudi, five family melams dominated for quite a long time. Several dancer-actors enriched the performances through their spirited participation. Those that performed under the aegis of Chinta vari Melam were many, since its active work spanned almost over three generations (when Venkatarama Natya Mandali replaced Chinta vari Melam). Scores of performers were initiated into it and made their contribution. Besides those that were regular participants, many others whose short tenures in the melam would otherwise go unnoticed, mention must be made of some such important dance-actors.

Vedantam Laxminarayana, son of Janardanayya and Vedantam Anjaneyulu, son of Raghavaiah were known for their *uddhata* roles. Especially associated with Chinta vari melam (though they belonged to other melams) as actors were Mahankali Sreeramulu (father of Satyanarayana), Bhagavathula Narasimham, son of Yeggayya, Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry (long associated with Venkatarama Natya Mandali), son of Venkateswarlu and Pasumarthi Anjaneyulu, son of Chalapathi had accredited themselves well in female roles. Pasumarthi Audinarayana, another son of Chalapati, was known for his comic roles. Similarly Chinta Suryaprakasa Rao, son of Chalamaiah and Chinta Seetharamanjaneyulu, son of Narayana Murthy, helped the Venkatarama Natya Mandali in its early days of stabilization. Mention must be made of Bhagavathula Satya Sundara Rama Sastry and Vedantam Veera Raghavaiah for their long-time association with Venkatarama Natya Mandali in the recent past.



A rare photograph of a galaxy of Kuchipudi performers with their patron Rajah Siva Rama Prasad of Challapalli (around 1936)

Photo courtesy : Sri P.V.G. Krishna Sarma

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| 1. Mahankali Peda Satyanarayana | 2. Yeleswarapu Sri Ramulu |
| 3. Bhagavatula Chalapathi | 4. Pasumarti Venkateswarulu |
| 5. Vedantam Ramakrishnaiah | 6. Sri Siva Ramakrishna Prasad, Rajah of Challapalli |
| 7. Bhagavatula Seetatah | 8. ?? |
| 9. Chinta Audinarayana | 10. Vempati Subbarao |
| 11. Vedantam Chalapathi | 12. Nimmagadda Sivaramaiah Siddhanti |
| 13. Pasumarti Anjaya | 14. Bhagavatula Rajaiah |
| 15. Pasumarti Anjaneya Sarma | 16. Bhagavatula Brahmaandam |
| 17. Mahankali Chinna Satyanarayana | 18. Tadepalli Satyanarayana |
| 19. Vempati Pedda Satyam | 20. Bhagavatula Satyanarayana |
| 21. ?? | 22. Pasumarti Ramamurthy |
| 23. Mahankali Subba Rao | 24. Chinta Rattayya |
| 25. Chinta Krishnamurthy | 26. Bhagavatula Kamayya's grandson |
| 27. Mahankali Chinna Venkaiah | 28. Vedantam Venkateswarulu |
| 29. Yelleswarapu Sri Rama Murthy | 30. Chintalapati Lakshmi Narasimham |
| 31. ?? | 32. Bhagavatula Kutumba Sastry |
| 33. Yelleswarapu Vasudeva Sastry | 34. Vedantam Prahlada Sarma |
| 35. Vedantam Parvatesam's brother | 36. Yeleswarapu Sri Ramulu's son |
| 37. Yelleswarapu Sri Ramulu | 38. Hemadri Sivatah |
| 39. ?? | 40. Vedantam Parvatesam |
| 41. Pasumarthi Seshaiiah's son | 42. ?? |
| 43. Chinta Seetharamanjaneyulu. | |

References

1. Chinta Ramanadham, *Kuchipudi Natyacharyula Charitra Putalu*, Kuchipudi : Akhila Bharata Kuchipudi Natya Kala Mandali, 1988, p.15. Also see Chintalapati Laxminarasimha Sastry, *Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu*, p.276, in which the author says that Hari Madhavaiah exchanged Bhama kalapam with the Southern artists and got, in return, *Prahlada* and *Usha Parinayam*. This view does not seem to have any basis.
2. Interview with Pasumarthi Venkateswarlu.
3. Jalasutram Rukmininadha Sastry, "Raju Vesham," *Andhra Patrika* (daily), March 9, 1941.
4. Chinta Ramanatham, op. cit., p.72.

V

Pagati Vesham : **Some Well-known Performers**

Vesham means donning a costume and make-up that hides the real person, i.e., impersonation. “Pagati” means “during the day”. *Pagati vesham*¹, then, is a diurnal impersonation - doing or playing a role during the daytime. The group performing the *veshams* dons on a new *vesham* each day and goes to every house in a village exhibiting their art of playing different roles for more than thirty days and entertain people. On the last day they don the role of “Sarada” - the Goddess of Learning and seek alms from each house. The form is often used in plural as “Pagati veshalu”.

As actors in costume of a chosen *vesham* go to a house to exhibit a story, it is “theatre at the door step”² of each house in every village. Though it is not a full fledged all-night performance, each *vesham* runs at least for half-an-hour and is a self-contained dramatic unit by itself with a well defined beginning, a middle and an end. In fact, no *Pagati vesham* shows a complete story ; it contains “character sketches” of very familiar personalities known to the rural people - types that represent castes, communities and ritual performers. Their speech habits, their behavioural patterns, their ways of life as seen by people ; their idiosyncracies - are all the subject of the *veshams* - which are often satirical pieces on several contemporary castes and communities, with a sting of good-humoured, genial and enjoyable ironic thrust acceptable even to the members whose life style is the butt of ridicule - a great medium of entertainment in the early twentieth century Andhra villages.

Donning someone else’s attire and impersonate him was an art practised more vehemently by the kings in olden days - not as a form of entertainment, but as a needy instrument for political expediency.

Known as 'Bahurupee' and 'Pagalu vesham' in other parts of the country, *pagati vesham* entertaining people by role playing during the day is an all-India phenomenon. We have in history and theatre several instances of people donning different roles to achieve political goals. In *Mudrarakshasam*, a Sanskrit play by Visakhadatta, a spy in the costume of a fortune-teller, Nipunaka by name, steals a minister's seal to pressurise him to be the minister of Chandragupta. In Sri Harsha's *Ratnavali*, Sagarika and Vasavadatta exchange their persona which was well exploited for dramatic suspense. In Andhra legends and history also, we come across several such stories. Raja Kalinga Gangu was said to have regained his kingship due to the manipulations of his spies in disguise. The story of Sambeta Gurava Raju, which contains the first-ever reference to Kuchipudi available in history, and his ultimate death in the hands of Veera Narasimha Raya was an example of the Kuchipudi artists donning the role of Gurava Raju and enacting his misdeeds.

Andhra history of the early twentieth century has recorded that several caste families engaged themselves in *pagati vesham* performances. The most popular of them were the Gaddipadu Bhagavathulu² from a village called Gaddipadu (also known as Hanumantharaya puram) in Krishna district, very near to Kuchipudi. According to hereditary stories circulated among the Gaddipadu families, one Pallavajhula Venkataramaiah, a Telugu Brahmin from the Mysore area came to Andhra, trained several people in the art and settled down at Repalle, Guntur district³. The families of Pallavajhula, Srikaaram, Kuchi, Kanuvuri, Bellamkonda were popularly engaged in performing *pagati veshalu*. Some Kuchipudi artists, at a particularly difficult time in their lives, chose to shift their profession to *pagati vesham* and thus started the Kuchipudi *pagati vesham* tradition.

Some critics have suggested that Kuchipudi artists, in the initial stages of shifting to *pagati veshams*, worked with the Gaddipadu Bhagavathulu and learnt their art. There is no evidence to prove this. On the contrary, the texts used by Gaddipadu and

Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu are so different any idea of direct borrowing can be ruled out. At best, the Gaddipadu Bhagavathulu might have inspired the Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu for taking up the art form for their livelihood.

But, when they had their profession of performing kalapams and yakshaganams, why did some of the Kuchipudi artists choose *pagati vesham* ? The answer is not difficult to presume. The later part of 19th century and early part of the 20th century are difficult days for traditional arts, especially for Kuchipudi dance art which relied upon people's patronage for long. During 1890's upto 1920's there was an upsurge of theatre activity in Andhra. The musical stage play (padya natakam) gained an unprecedented momentum. Due to its popularity, all earlier forms had been neglected by the public. It was a rage to see a stage play and people reserved advanced tickets a month before! Besides, Kuchipudi had become stale, partly because they would not introduce new yakshaganams into their repertoire and partly because the entire Kuchipudi team was never consistently wholesome with every actor of the same calibre. Though they were professionals, sometimes they had to make unprofessional adjustments. There were hardly two or three female and male leads. Because of their inadequacies and also because of the audience's apathy, the popularity of the Kuchipudi plays was on the retreat. In fact, before it got rejuvenated in 1950's, the five melams virtually wound up their activities and good singers among them went to participate in the stage plays. Senior people like Chinta Krishna Murthy, Rama Murthy and Vedantam Ramakrishnayya were themselves forced to choose stage plays as an alternative to yakshaganams and kalapams.

It was during these difficult days that some of the artists chose *pagati vesham* as an alternative profession. They were only trained in dance art ; there was no way that all kalapam and yakshaganam artists could be of a high order. Even the best did not have continuous work. In addition, the first World War had a dig at their meagre earnings. The lands did not yield enough for

the family. Those that could not fit into kalapams and those that did bit parts in yakshaganams (if at all there were performances) were paid meagre wages and so, with their knowledge of *angika* and *vachika* and of dance they entered into the new profession to make their both ends meet!

As such, the arguments put forward by critics⁴ that Kuchipudi people started performing *pagati veshams* since 18th century might not hold to reason. It might have started in 18th C. but it is essentially a late 19th century and early 20th century art form as far as the Kuchipudi people are concerned. It was also perhaps true that people who were beyond the age of performing the two *Bhama veshams* and the need to earn some extra money during the lean season of the year (especially the rainy season) got themselves into *pagati vesham*.

Though *pagati vesham* with the Kuchipudi artists was a short lived profession it was an engaging one for many. Between 1930-1950 the art form was well received. But the residents of Kuchipudi *per se* looked down upon the *pagati vesham*. In fact it is a daringly open form which offers innumerable opportunities for an artist to show his calibre. Besides, the artists must use all the weaponry in their armory to please their heterogenous audiences since they seek and go to their audiences rather than they coming to see the performances. Added to this, *pagati vesham* is a difficult art form because to create an illusion of reality during the day time when illusions break and realities become obvious, is much more challenging and difficult than creating an illusion at night.

As the actors of kalapam and yakshaganam projected themselves as superior and all the other artists donning *pagati veshams* inferior, very slowly these artists withdrew from *pagati veshams*.

Kuchipudi people used to perform 32 *veshams*⁵ :

- 1) Budabukkala
- 2) Bairagi
- 3) Pathan
- 4) Fakir
- 5) Somayajulu - Somidevama
- 6) Arthanareeswara
- 7) Brahmin widow
- 8) Komati
- 9) Panthulu
- 10) Satani
- 11) Jangam

- 12) Bhetala
- 13) Shakti
- 14) Devara pette
- 15) Yerukala
- 16) Bhogam
- 17) Dommara
- 18) Koya
- 19) Dadinamma
- 20) Gadusu Pellam
- 21) The old husband
- 22) Kaasi kavadi
- 23) Pittala dora
- 24) Bhatraju
- 25) Linga Balija
- 26) Vaishnava
- 27) Reddi
- 28) A drunken man
- 29) Mandula vallu
- 30) Chenchu
- 31) Koya
- 32) Sarada

Among these, “Arthanareeswara”, “Kaasi kavadi” and “Sarada” are awe-inspiring religious forms. The others are character studies of communities ; Budabukkala people are the heralds of the dawn ; bairagis are nomadic singers ; pathan is a shrewd manipulator of the poor, but falls a prey to a local *vesya* ; Somayajulu - Somidevi is a hilarious study of an old orthodox man marrying an young girl and always suspicious of her and she, in turn, moving around freely with the old man’s disciples and is clever not to allow her husband find it out.

Each one of the *veshams* needs an individual study of the type one is imitating - in dress, mannerisms, speech behaviour, in *sattvika* expressions and the peculiar traits of each community. Besides being subtle studies of communities and people belonging to them, each one is deliciously humourous. Even the members of the communities, which are being targeted, profess that what is portrayed is true and will have a happy laugh at themselves. This needs great expertise in all the four abhinayas. Kuchipudi produced some enviable *pagati vesham* artists who had proven qualities that made a *vesham* click like ready wit, good musical and *laya* knowledge, an ability to imitate the dialects and speech patterns of the various castes and communities and a character suitability.

Some of the major exponents and their specialities may be recounted in this context. Vedantam Parvateesam⁶ says that late 18th C. artists like Peddibhotla Dasaratharamaiah, Surayya and Janakiramayya were the originators followed by other able performers. Later artists like Darbha Srinivasulu, Darbha Durgaiyah, Yelleswarapu Venkatanarayana, Bhagavathula Kumara Swamy, Pasumarthi Seshaiyah, Srinivasulu, Chalapati, Pillalamarri

Komaraiah, Hari Laxminarayana, Bhagavathula Vissayya, Pasumarti Satyanarayana, Mahankali Peda Satyanarayana, Mahankali Venkaiah, Vedantam Mallikarjunudu, Tadepalli Subbaiah, Hemadri Sivaramakrishna Sarma, Mahankali Krishna Murthy, Chinta Surya Prakasham and several others proved their expertise in the art.

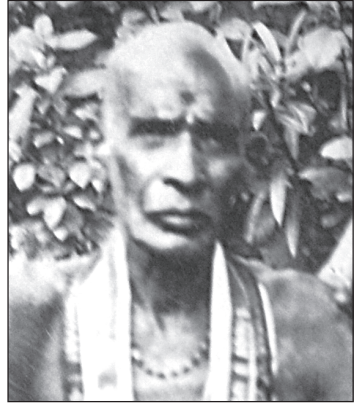
Peddibhotla Dasaratharamaiah was said to be the first one who had created history as a *pagati vesham* actor. It is said that in the guise of a “Pathan” he mesmerised the collector of Krishna who, when he came to know about the true identity of the man, honoured Dasaratharamaiah with a golden armlet. His two brothers, Surayya and Janakiramyya, were also adept in the art. When the elder brother did the role of a “pathan”, the two younger brothers appeared as prostitutes (*vesyas*). Pillalamarri Kamayya’s “Bairagi” *vesham* was full of magic and mesmerism, *hasta laghavam* and *jalasthambhana*. A well-read pundit, Kamayya used to comment on the slokas of Bhagavadgita in a peculiarly humourous way. He was famous in the twenties and thirties of 20th C.

Darbha Srinivasulu’s “Dhashtikam Pantulu”, “Mandula Vesham” and “Yerukala Vesham” were known for their variety and while speaking the dialects Srinivasulu was as perfect as the native speakers. His brother Durgaiah was a great mimic ; he would reproduce the sounds of birds and animals and even men and women - perhaps an early practitioner of today’s ventriloquism.

Two people stand out even among the several experts. Bhagavathula Kumara Swamy, a master mridangist who could play mridangam with his mouth is one! His “Dhashtikam pantulu” was a replica of the Victorian Niyogi Brahmin whose outward behaviour of being a man of authority and a veritable cheat inside was brought out excellently. His “Komati” and “Arthanareeswara” were studies in contrast. In the former, he was a typical village merchant, with the accent and tone of a vaisya. In the later he proved his worth as a Kuchipudi artist performing two roles in

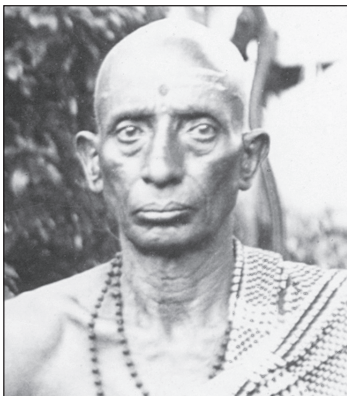
one person, for “Ardhanareeswara” contained tricky alternation between Siva and Parvati, to be performed by the same actor! His ‘Fakir’ was also popular. His Hindusthani songs and Urdu speeches were a treat to everyone, even if the audience did not know the language.

Similarly Pasumarti Seshayya whose fame had spread far and wide was a constant invitee to about 101 village festivals and he had to perform 9 different *veshams* during each festival. His ‘Bhatraju’ *vesham* was a celebrated one! Bhatraju is a typical ‘courtier’ who would sing endlessly in praise of a patron. Seshayya, in this role, would recite extempore poems with any initial letter from the Telugu alphabet - a much appreciated feat!



Pasumarti Seshayya

He was also a fine singer and so in ‘Jakkula Purandhri’ (a *vesham* he alone used to perform) he used to recite the ballads of Are Marathi katha and Bobbili katha (though an anachronism) with great verve and musical excellence.



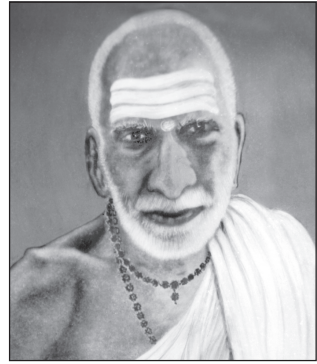
Pasumarti Chalapathi

Pasumarti Chalapathi and Yeleswarapu Venkatanarayana are known for their “Kaasi Kavadi”, which is a kind of a magic lantern show, showing images of how Yama and his men torture sinners. While depicting the punishments meted out to them, the singers exhort the need for pious living. It was said that people used to throng around them to have a look at the “yama loka” and the tortures human beings were

subjected to, drawn in pictures, and shown through a peep-hole.

Hari Laxminarayana of the early twentieth century was a popular *pagati vesham* performer having concentrated on the comic character sketches - 'Panthulu', 'Somayajulu' and 'Komati'. Pasumarthi Satyanarayana's 'Sarada' *vesham* was sobre and serene and evoked religious sentiments because he was an excellent singer of divine songs!

Among the Pagati vesham actors of later years (1920-30) mention must be made of Mahankali Peda Satyanarayana for his "Jangam" *vesham*, Hemadri Sivaramakrishna Sarma for his "Somayajulu" and "Setti Baliya" *veshams* who were justly famous. Mahankali Venkaiah who belonged to a slightly earlier age specialized in *tamasa* roles and also in the *veshams* of "Bairagi", "Fakir", "Vaishnava" and "Budabukkala". A



Mahankali
Peda Satyanarayana

student of Bhagavatula Kumaraswamy in *pagati veshams*, Venkaiah would have brought a revival to the art only if Chinta Venkataramaiah did not draw him to do odd roles in his yakshaganas and in later years if P.Pullaiah would not have brought him on to the silver screen!

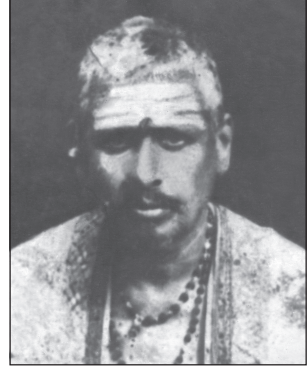


Vedantam Mallikarjuna Sarma

V e d a n t a m Mallikarjuna Sarma who had a long innings in Pagati vesham was perhaps the last of the talented performers in the art. His 'Pantulu', 'Budabukkala', 'Bairagi' and other veshams have earned him a place in the Kuchipudi history of Pagati veshams.

But he also left it to start a Kalakshetram at New Delhi. He was the very first Kuchipudi Guru who started a school in the country's capital city.

Among the contemporaries (1930-50) Bhagavathula Nagalingaiah, Chinta Prakasam, Yeleswarpu Anjaneyulu, Vedantam Ghantaiah, Yeleswarapu Veeraraghavaiah and Tadepalli Chandrayya were the few people initiated into the art. However, in course of time, lack of patronage and a kind of self-denial forced the Kuchipudi artistes to stop performing *pagati veshams!* A great loss indeed for



Vedantam Ghantaiah

allowing a lively art form to die away unsung, unwept and unhonoured (like many a noble artiste of Kuchipudi)!

References

1. For a general structure and history of "Pagati Vesham," see M. Nagabhushana Sarma, "Towards an Instant Theatre," *Sangeet Natak* (April-Sept.), 1982, pp.8-15.
2. Ibid., p.12.
3. Mikkilineni Radhakrishna Murthy, *Andhrula Janapada Kala Rupalu*, Vijyawada, 1992 p.162.
4. Chinta Ramanatham suggests that the Gaddipadu Bhagavathulu learnt the art from the Kuchipudi people (*Kuchipudi Natya Visisthata*, p.32) and Chintalapati says the reverse is true (*Kuchipudi Bhagavathulu*, p.168)
5. Nataraja Ramakrishna says that the Gaddipadu Bhagavathulu were performing 72 *veshams*, *Dakshinatyula Natya Kala Charitra*, Hyderabad: Perini International, p.224.
6. Vedantam Parvatesam, "Pagati Veshamulu", *Kuchipudi Bhagavatulu* (1985) as quoted by Chinta Ramanatham, *Kuchupudi Natya Visisthata*, p.32.

Prominent artists in the yakshagana revival



Standing : Burra Vjjayaramaiah (mridangist), Vedantam Sambaiah (violinist), Mahankali Sriramulu, Pasumarti Venkateswarulu, Bhagavatula Narasimham, Chinta Radhakrishnamurty and Darbha Venkateswarlu. **Middle row :** Pasumarti Anjaneyulu, Pasumarti Subrahmanya Sastry, Chinta Audinarayana, Mahankali Sathanarayana, Chinta Krishnamurty and Kothari Sriramulu. **Seated on the floor: ?**, Bhagavatula Sitaramaiah, Pasumarti Sitaramaiah, Chinta Sitarama Anjaneyulu, ?

VI

Yakshagana Revival : The Success Story

Introduction

*K*uchipudi yakshagana, known for its synthesis of *sringara* and *veera*, *thandava* and *lasya*, the ferocious and the delicate, with an interwoven story from mythology, caught the fancy of the art lovers for more than five generations. Initiated by Chinta Venkataramaiah and aided by stalwarts like Hari Madhavaiah, the yakshagana form looked almost like eclipsing the kalapam, for the latter needed to present an unbounding and varying shades of the erotic, capable to be mastered by only the best of the artistes. Kalapam is almost a solo performance, with a non-descript intermediary intruding on and off, whereas the yakshagana is a group collaboration, which has to depict greater variety of emotions, stronger emotive responses and, above all, a sense of a unified presentation. Chinta Venkataramaiah, who had shaped the yakshagana as a viable form worthy of presentation and as a complementary, if not an alternative, form to kalapam, consolidated it and transformed the folk format into a perfect classical one and toured extensively.

After Venkataramaiah passed away in 1949, the mantle of leadership fell on his eldest son, Rama Murthy, who had steered the destinies of the troupe only for one year when he also passed away at a young age of 42, in 1950. Venkataramaiah's third son, who was until then a timid young man working in the shadows of his father and brother, was destined to take up the leadership and prove his might. Krishna Murthy, by his sincerity of purpose, by his over-all mastery in the craft and more than anything else, by his amiability brought back all the old actor-members of the Chinta troupe as well as other troupes to form a formidable group of dancer

- actors. He named his new melam after his father as “Venkatarama Natya Mandali”. Every actor worth his name was a disciple of Venkataramaiah and all of them flocked into the new outfit to make it the most sought-after classical yakshagana troupe in Andhra and proved its superiority in Andhra and outside.

Several important actors were associated with this revival. Major figures like Mahankali Satyanarayana, Darbha Venkateswarlu, Pasumarthy Kondala Rayudu and Bokka Kumaraswamy, along with many others donning secondary roles were closely associated with this success story of yakshagana.

Chinta Rama Murthy (1908 - 1950)



In Chinta Rama Murthy, elder son of Venkataramaiah, one would see the best of the talents hereditarily acquired, systematically trained and carefully nurtured. Rama Murthy was said to be an extremely handsome man with a fair skin, large eyes,

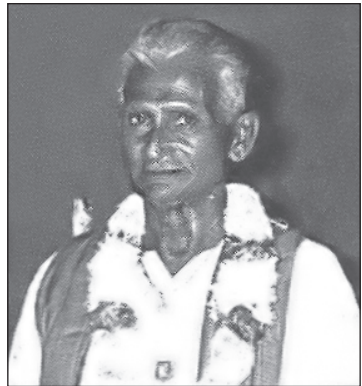
expressive fore-head and above all an alacrity that few in Kuchipudi were known for.

Born in 1908, as the elder son of Chinta Venkataramaiah and Annapurnamma, he had his traditional training from two of Kuchipudi's greatest teachers - Vempati Venkatanarayana and his own father, Chinta Venkataramaiah. Rama Murthy was equally proficient in female and male charactes. In his *Bhama vesham*, he was the cynosure of all eyes and as Rama in *Rama natakam* or Krishna in *Gaya natakam* he was "Prince Charming". He became the leader of the Chinta vari Melam, by now the most prominent of the several "family repertories" of Kuchipudi. Besides Satyabhama in *Bhama kalapam* and Gollabhama in *Golla kalapam* and Dadinamma, his portrayals of Arjuna in *Gaya natakam*, Dharmaraja in *Virata parvam* and as Laxmana in *Rama natakam* earned for him the admiration of discriminating audiences. He was considered, every inch, a classical dancer-actor.

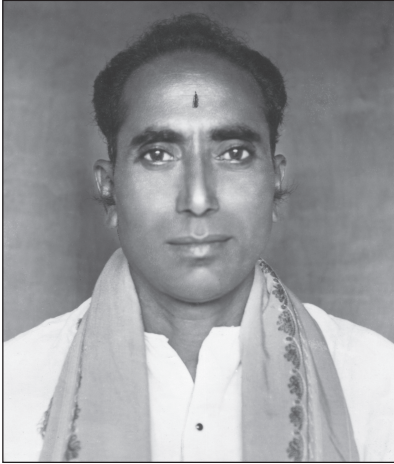
It was unfortunate that he passed away, very prematurely, in 1950 at an young age of 42 and was succeeded by his younger brother, Chinta Krishna Murthy.

Chinta Radhakrishna Murthy (1910 - 1988)

Son of Chinta Narayana Murthy, Radhakrishna Murthy had his early training from his father and later from two distinguished gurus - Chinta Venkataramaiah and Vempati Venkatanarayana. Known for his excellent portrayals of both *Bhama veshams* in *Bhama kalapam* and *Golla kalapam*, he later took active part in building the Chinta vari Melam. He was the major female impersonator in the second generation of the Melam.



Chinta Krishna Murthy (1912 - 1969) : In the foot steps of his father



Born to Chinta Venkata-ramaiah and Annapurnaamma in 1912, Krishna Murthy started his dance education under his father at the age of seven, while attending a regular gurukul school run by a local teacher. The gurukulam for his dance education was the open front yard of his house, usually called the 'garidi', where seniors and juniors assembled from dawn to dusk to learn and to practise.

Krishna Murthy did not have the advantage of his father's training for long periods since the latter's attention was to senior students. So he was put under his elder brother Rama Murthy. Others who learnt from his brother likewise included Mahankali Satyanarayana, Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry and others, all of them in later years, to become ace actors. He had also the advantage of observing closely all the seniors learning roles in yakshaganas and also simultaneously practising kalapams and even solo items that would go into the kalapams and the yakshaganams.

Krishna Murthy was endowed with a comely figure and a sweet voice. His music teacher was the veteran, Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu. Though Krishna Murthy wanted to be a *Bhama vesham* performer mainly, he had soon to accept the male lead of the troupe as his father slowly withdrew from active work and his brother had to take over the responsibility of the Sutradhara. He did the roles of Arjuna and Sri Krishna in *Gaya natakam*, Aniruddha in *Usha parinayam*, Rukmangada in *Mohini Rukmangada* and Harischandra. By the time he was 18, he mastered all the major roles in yakshaganas.

Krishna Murthy revered his brother as his second and most influential guru. With the donning of the lead Yakshagana roles, he had stepped into the major foray of his brother. But he aspired for more. He wanted, like his brother, to be a master of ceremonies and at the helm of affairs, both artistic and organizational. He would wonder at the tact with which his brother handled very critical on-stage situations and was equally astonished at his sense of humour, when he took up the role of Madhavi while Pasumarti Subrahmanya Sastry was performing 'Bhama'. His ready wit, his improvisational skills, his ironic mimicking of the heroine were all so perfect that he would like to imbibe them, if time and his father's acceptance were to come. But they came only after a decade and that too at a critical juncture in Kuchipudi's artistic journey.

Even while performing the yakshagana roles Krishna Murthy learnt the intricacies of nattuvangam and used to accompany his brother, when he was not on the stage as an actor. It was said that a real testing time came when his father could not accompany the team due to old age and his brother could not lead the team as sutradhara for he was ill. This was at Tenali, an elitist town in Guntur district during the Navaratri festival. The Kuchipudi team had to perform *Bhakta Prahlada* on the day. As ill-luck (or luck?) would have it, their all-night programme was preceded by a *Harikatha Kalakshepam* by the greatest of Telugu performers, a scholar-performer with expert knowledge of *sangeeta* and *nritya*, *swara* and *tala*, Brahmasri Adibhatla Narayana Das¹.

The Kuchipudi show started at 9.30 P.M. Chinta Krishna Murthy led the team as Sutradhara. Bokka Kumara Swamy, Mahankali Satyanarayana and Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry were the lead actors. Without informing anyone, Adibhatla came into the *pandal* and sat quietly in a corner. Krishna Murthy's dream of leading the team as Sutradhara was never so scary! But he imbibed the leadership qualities of his father and the tact and instantaneous repartee of his brother. He put them to test on that day. Besides, the *jatis* he incorporated, though they were the traditionally followed ones, had a new verve that day with the



Chinta Krishnamurthy as the Sutradhara in the Kuchipudi performance of *Prahlada*

changing emotional nuances introduced by the Sutradhara. At a critical juncture in the “Melavimpu”, the usual practice of *swara prasthanana* after the *pallavi* was changed by Krishna Murthy and the *pallavi* was followed by a *Sabda prasthanana* giving a rare rhythmic tilt. Adhibhatla was so overjoyed with Krishna Murthy’s performance that he stood on his feet during the rest of the performance and jumped on to the stage as soon as the *mangalam* was sung. The hefty well-built man he was, he literally swirled the boy all around the stage, hugged him and said that he had seen a real, real yakshagana that day. He also hailed Krishna Murthy as a ‘born’ Sutradhara, for no one can master the art at such a young age and that was the blessing of the goddess Amba. He also ordained that Krishna Murthy was the future hope of a great tradition, presented him with his own specially-made *tala* (cymbals) and honoured him with a rich shawl. A numb Krishna Murthy fell prostrate before Adibhatla with all humility - a story that he would recount in later years with tears of joy and gratitude².

But he was not to be a regular Sutradhara until the next decade and a half. It was destined to be so because his father’s demise in 1949 and his brother’s untimely death in 1950, left him, literally, an orphan. But friends like Pasumarthy Subrahmanya Sastry stood by him and with the ardent support of the members of the existing ‘melas’, which were all incorporated into the new forum, founded the Venkatarama Natya Mandali, in a way a continuation of the tradition established originally in 1880 by his father!

Until Krishna Murthy took over the cudgels of the Venkatarama Natya Mandali, Kuchipudi was, so to say, not in the main focus of the dance scenario in the country. There were strong reasons to be so, both positive and negative. On one side, the Kuchipudians never bothered about publicity. They were into a profession - and to do it well is what is ordained to them, they believed. This might simply be a rustic simplicity or utter ignorance, we do not know.

It was a time when, frustrated with the non-availability of proper opportunities talented people were going hither and thither—some choosing the celluloid field, some searching for other greener pastures where they could have wealthy disciples to look after them. The bonafides of Kuchipudi dance itself was in question because of a mishandling of a national opportunity. Things were drifting apart. Krishna Murthy had stuck to his guns. He was on a mission to revitalise his own team, With the two actors - Bokka Kumaraswamy and Pasumarti Subrahmanya Sastry growing old, he had already stepped into the shoes of Bokka when his brother was leading ; but since he took over the artistic leadership he had to groom new talent. Not many youngsters of Kuchipudi could take up the challenging job of a female impersonator. His search for a charming young person spotted Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma who, after a stint of preliminary training in dance under his borther Prahlada Sarma and in music under Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu, moved to Machilipatnam to continue his music education and to learn violin. It was Kuchipudi's greatest turning point, in recent times, when Krishna Murthy prevailed upon Satyam to return to the village and be a member of the



Mandali and get trained as Satyabhama and also in the roles of the other heroines of the yakshaganas³.

Satyanarayana Sarma, who owed his greatness, in no small degree, to Krishna Murthy always remembered him as an ideal guru, always willing to teach and never ever angry for the shortcomings of his

disciples. He recounted how his guru not only had immense patience while teaching, but had abundant words of praise if the students did well. Krishna Murthy, though a leader of extraordinary merit, bestowed on Sarma the choicest encomiums. In fact, their combined effort brought Kuchipudi unprecedented national recognition and all round praise. In later years, new people joined: Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma was a dependable actor; so was P.V.G.Krishna Sarma as the second sutradhara maintaining the rhythm. Then there was Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma, with his imposing personality and ease in body movements who enthralled audiences with his *tamasa* roles. All of them were an asset to Kuchipudi's remarkable sojourn for two decades. The assembling of all these people, individually talented, though with diverse attitudes, was the greatest achievement of Krishna Murthy.

In all these efforts the goodwill, help and advice came to Krishna Murthy both from the elders and the youngsters. Bhagavathula Ramalinga Sastry, a scholar was always ready to explain difficult passages and referred him to the originals. In *tala* and *swara prasthanana*, though Krishna Murthy was adept in both, he depended on the advice of his guru Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu and after his demise, on P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, his junior colleague. In later years when Venkatarama Natya Mandali was chosen to represent Kuchipudi in national dance festivals or in its victorious tour of the south sponsored by the central Sangeet Natak Akademi, his ideal companion, adviser and leader was Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao⁴. Banda, known for his role of Srikrishna on the theatrical stage, served as Krishna Murthy's ideal spectator. He would unswervingly criticise if there was a lacuna and praise in no uncertain terms if he was pleased. As luck would have it, in this case for Kuchipudi, the ideal combination of all these illustrious people brought traditional Kuchipudi world wide fame.

A Sutradhara's job in a yakshagana performance is like doing the rope walking in a circus arena. He must be adept both in *sangeeta* and *sahitya* ; in *sangeeta* he must be well versed both in

the *raga* and the *tala* aspects. Above all, he must be thoroughly groomed into the nuances of the language, for, while the actor usually supplied the text written, the Sutradhara must supply the sub-text and the context, making a whole new co-text, which ultimately is the received text for the audience. The Sutradhara must also sing the *daruvus* in all three *kalams* and must be able to freely assay his rendering between the *tara sthayi* and the *mandara sthayi* as the occasion demands. Further his singing must supply and sustain the mood of the character. He must initiate the performance with proper rituals, summon the characters onto the stage on time, introduce them to the audience, converse with them in their own idiom, thereby supplying the audience information regarding the place, time and context. He must be aware of the on-going performance graph and see that proper tempo is maintained. He might occasionally need to enthuse his actors, cover up their shortcomings and all the time, keep up the audience interest. A Herculean task, indeed! And the only Sutradhara who would measure up to all these qualities in the one hundred and fifty years of Kuchipudi is Chinta Krishna Murthy! That was his mastery of the trade!

Krishna Murthy's qualities as Sutradhara endeared him to one and all. He imbibed these presentational qualities, by learning the art and science of nattuvangam from various sources - the main ones being his father and elder brother. But the quality of commanding an over-all performance was a self-taught asset. Two aspects of this extremely winnowing characteristic are eminently noticeable : one was that he had the capacity to modulate his voice according to the character he was accompanying and could change his voice in tune with the *tamasa* roles, with the romantic roles and the heroine's roles. This is an inborn virtue which placed him much above all the great nattuvangam leaders of Kuchipudi. The second aspect is his ability to interpret a character's words through his or her bodily actions. This was particularly true when he was talking to the characters of the maids of the heroine - Chitrarekha and Madhavi. He would imitate their body gestures closely which instantaneously brought roaring laughter from the audience.

Krishna Murthy's ability to accompany any type of character - romantic or humourous, love-lorn or anger-stricken - i.e. from the serious character to the humourous was done in a way that would be impossible to predict. His improvised intrusions would shock even the most experienced. This was because of his long training



Chinta Krishnamurthy as Sutradhara
invoking the proper mood

and experience as an actor. The range of characters he performed would astonish even the most rigid adherents to the art of acting. He was Rama in *Rama Natakam*, Harischandra in the yakshagana of the same name, Krishna in *Gayopakhyanam* and Rukmangada in *Mohini Rukmangada* - all, major roles. But, to take each play separately, in *Rama Natakam* alone he took up the roles of Rama, Laxmana, the washerman and Valmiki ; in *Prahlada*, he was Indra and the snake charmer 'Janta Puli' ; in *Harischandra* he acted in the main role as well as in the role of Nakshatraka - thus getting into the feel of both the comic and the serious. Two comic roles that he himself had cherished were those of Nakshatraka and Janta puli. In the latter role he transformed himself into a rustic snake charmer so excellently that he would steal all the credits. He once played the role of Sunkari Kondadu in "Singi - Singadu", a rare interlude in Golla kalapam at Guntur (in 1954) and made the entire 2000 - strong auditorium into splits of laughter, including the then Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, K.Brahmananda Reddy. This energetic portrayal of comic characters put him in good stead when he was performing as Sutradhara.

While Kuchipudi was gaining meaningful momentum with the yakshagana becoming popular all over Andhra and with non-hereditary performers spreading the solo tradition far and wide,

within their own limited spheres, there erupted an unfortunate controversy regarding its classical status⁵. There was a lack of communication on the part of the adherents of Kuchipudi and a lack of awareness on the part of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi which resulted in a kind of a veiled tussle between the two. The Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi, under the presidentship of R.B.Ramakrishnam Raju, thought it fit to organize an all-India festival to familiarize the non-Telugu people how much classical it was. P.V. Rajamannar, the then president of the Central Akademi, then sent a message to the state Akademi, announcing that at no time was there a doubt in the minds of the Akademi officials and the dance maestros that Kuchipudi was a classical dance form⁶. This assuaged the feelings of the Andhra practitioners of Kuchipudi. The festival featured Chinta Krishna Murthy's team with Vedantam Satyam playing the role of Usha in *Usha Parinayam*.



R.B.Ramakrishnam Raju

It looks as though the Central Akademi wanted to make amends to what had happened. When the central Government started the cultural exchange programmes to bring about better understanding among its citizens regarding the cultures of other states it invited the Venkatarama Natya Mandali through the State Akademi to perform their yakshaganas and kalapams in Tamil Nadu. The State Akademi gladly sponsored the tour with Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, a champion of the cause of Kuchipudi, as the leader and Krishna Murthy as the artistic head of the tour⁷. The tour in Madras presidency took place from 3rd October to 13th October, 1960. This tour, in a way, was a turning point in the modern history of Kuchipudi, for the artistes had mesmerized the Bharatanatyam exponents, musicians and officials and showed them the true essence of Kuchipudi.

The tour started on 3rd October, 1960 with an inaugural performance of *Usha Parinayam* at Rasika Ranjani Sabha Hall, Mylapore. The entire dance fraternity of Madras turned up, partly with a suspicion about the potentialities of the Andhra dance artists and partly with an air of patronage tantalizingly bestowed, presumably, on undeserving talent. The audience comprised of the who is who of Madras dance scenario : Rukmini Devi Arundale, Balasaraswathi, Yamini Krishna Murthy, Indrani Rehman, Ramaiah Pillai, Dr.V.Raghavan, Prof. P.Samba Murthy and several other dance luminaries.

The programme itself got off with a newly incorporated “Poorvarangam”, with recitations from the four vedas and other stage preliminaries. Chinta Krishna Murthy led the singing team with Musunuri Venkata Ramana Murthy, a vocalist of repute, now initiated into Yakshagana singing, played the *sruthi*. Bokka Kumara Swamy and Palaparti Ramakrishnaiah on violin and Varanasi Gopalam on mridangam accompanied the recital. Mahankali Satyanarayana as Banasura and Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma as Usha excelled in their roles. Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma as Usha’s maid was noticeable. It was a treat to the Madras



Chinta and the other singers performing the ‘Poorva ranga’ rituals

connoisseurs, for they had never seen a drama and dance so aesthetically fused ; they never before heard dramatic music, the changing rhythms of which would unconsciously encapture them in varying moods of emotional intensity. With appreciation glowing on their faces, the entire auditorium stood in unison to congratulate the virgin show of these great, but yet unknown, master - performers from the neighbouring state.

The team's next performance in Madurai similarly went off with flying colours. The Victoria Hall in Madurai had its full capacity with five hundred more people sitting in the isles. About a thousand went away disappointed because the tickets were sold out. The programme itself consisted of excerpts from several of Kuchipudi's usual repertoire - the "pravesa daruvu" of *Bhama Kalapam*, a *tarangam*, a *sabdam* and the last scene of *Prahlada*. The three-hour programme was so successful that there was insistence that they should stay behind and give another performance the next day. But they couldn't oblige them as they had already scheduled their programme at Thanjavur the next day.

The Thanjavur programme was much more heartening because of the presence of the Melattur Bhagavata Mela artistes led by the illustrious Balu Bhagavathar. They did *Usha Parinayam* again. Everyone was thrilled at the dramatic potential of these dancers. Balu Bhagavathar hugged Chinta Krishna Murthy and told the audience that in no other art form in India *sangeeta* and *sahitya*, dance and drama, *tandava* and *lasya* were so meaningfully fused.

The troupe returned to Madras. The next evening witnessed one of the proudest moments for the Kuchipudi people. It performed *Bhama kalapam* at the Museum theatre. Those that missed the earlier performance, either due to gentle apathy or negligence attended it, besides Rukmini Devi, Krishna Iyer and the elite. Vishnu Ram Medhi, the governor, came with his wife and said at the end of the performance that he had never witnessed a more soul-filling play. He said the entire nation was proud of them. All stalwarts of Telugu industry and the film world were there and congratulated the team with tears of pride in their eyes !

The *Madras Mail*⁷ hailed the evening as a great event in the changing cultural milieu of the country and commented that all the flowers in Madras flowed on to the Museum Theatre!

The final performance the next day contained some choicest items of the Kuchipudi repertoire. Starting with the usual puja nrityam it had “Manduka sabdam”, “tarangam”. “Ramapattabhisheka Sabdam”, “Dasavataralu” and as a finale a couple of *daruvus* from Bhama Kalapam and the last scene of *Prahlada*. The “tarangam” performed by Pasumarti Rattaiah, with a dance to the *jatis* on a brass plate was received with thunderous applause. Vedantam Satyam’s ‘Madana’ *daruvu* was hailed as a masterly interpretation of *virahotkanthita*. Rukmini Devi, the sober humanist she was usually, lost herself in an emotional fervour and said that she would soon start a Kuchipudi section in Kalakshetra.

The success of the programme led people to realize how a well-knit classical dance-drama could elevate people’s minds. This success also gave Kuchipudi a firm standing in the line of other Indian classical dance forms such as Bharatanatyam and Kathakali. A proud moment for Andhra’s creative excellence, exhibited so rarely. B.N.Reddi, the doyen of Telugu film world in Madras, years later, recounted that those few moments really made them hold their heads high among fellow artists.

There were several other occasions when the Venkatarama Natya Mandali reached similar heights of artistic excellence : in Sapru House President Radhakrishnan had a special show organized. The



Chinta being honoured by the then President, Dr.S.Radhakrishnan. In the midst of them is Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao

1964 All-India Dance festival at Hyderabad inaugurated its week-long festival with the Mandali's *Usha Parinayam* when two senior colleagues met, embraced each other, with tears of gratitude in their eyes - Vedantam Raghavaiah, the festival president and Chinta Krishna Murthy, the leader of the artistic team.

Krishna Murthy was honoured by a grateful nation for his persistent efforts to re-enthuse Kuchipudi yakshagana. The blessings showered on him for his mastery of the art by Adibhatla Narayana Das was not the only instant of exhilaration. Parupalli Ramakrishnaiah, a much revered musician and teacher, after seeing Venkatarama Natya Mandali's *Bhama kalapam* and *Usha Parinayam* was so pleased that he arranged forty two consecutive performances of the two plays. On the evening of the last performance at Guntur, Parupalli gifted Chinta Krishna Murthy a golden ring and said it was in respect and appreciation of a 'humble' teacher to the "master" of an art!

Siddhendra Kalakshetram

It was Chinta Krishna Murthy's unique fortune to have been associated with the founding of the Siddhendra Kalakshetram at Kuchipudi. At the behest of Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao and Gottipati Brahmayya, a senior Congress leader, the then Minister for Endowments in the Congress government, Kalluri Chandramouli announced a sum of rupees fifty thousand as initial financial help to start the Kalakshetram. Banda brought an equal amount of money from the Central Akademi as matching grant. This paved the way for the starting of the Kalakshetram. The foundation stone for the Siddhendra Kalakshetram was laid on April 23, 1962 by Kalluri Chandramouli amidst vedic chants and the active participation of elders like Gottipati Brahmayya, Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, Neelamraju Venkateshaiah and the elders of the Kuchipudi village. All Kuchipudi Gurus were associated with it from the beginning and Vempati Chinna Satyam from Chennai and local elders like Chinta Krishna Murthy and P.V.G. Krishna Sarma participated in the function. The function was followed by a demonstration of dance by the youngsters of the village and by the performance of *Usha parinayam*.

**Laying of the foundation stone for Siddhendra Kalakshetram
at Kuchipudi on 23-4-1962**



Bhumi puja rituals by the dignitaries



Laying of the foundation stone



Guests arriving at the venue: a village elder, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, Gottipati Brahmayya, Kalluri Chandramouli, Neelamraju Venkata Seshaiah and Vempati Chinna Satyam



The inaugural meeting : Banda welcoming the guests



Chinta Krishna Murthy and the group's invocation: 'Amba paraku...'



Pasala Suryachandra Rao, President of A.P.Sangeet Natak Akademi, honouring Chinta with the title 'Bharata kala prapurna' at Vizianagaram

Wherever Krishna Murthy performed the yakshaganas and Bhama kalapam, he was honoured. The official recognition came a little later when the Andhra Pradesh Sangeeta Nataka Akademi honoured him with the title “Bharata kala prapurna” at the Dance festival conducted by the Akademi at Vizianagaram (1965). He also received the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1968.

Besides the official recognition, several incidents in the life of Krishna Murthy reveal with what admiration and awe fellow art lovers looked at him. Even today old timers at Kuchipudi recount how the commoners used to bow to him in respect at the dawn of the day after giving an all-night performance of *Rama natakam*, in which he appeared as Rama and was returning home in his full costume and make-up. He would change his costume at home. “He just looked like a re-incarnation of Rama!” remembered a 90- year old house wife at Kuchipudi!

Yet another incident in a village in Krishna district shows with what admiration and love Krishna Murthy and his team were held. At Kalavapudi agraharam, as the organizers themselves reported, the annual Rama Navami festival featured at least two plays by the Kuchipudi team every year. But in 1947 they replaced

them with stage plays by two well-known theatre groups. On the last day, every year, for over two decades. *Rama Natakam* was played and after the performance, the “radhotsavam” would start. Since there was no Kuchipudi play that year, the entire village rebelled against the organizers and did not allow the annual procession to take place. Next day the organizers had to approach Krishna Murthy, begged him to come and perform in their village. It was only after the Kuchipudi performance was over, the villagers allowed the procession to start. Such incidents of admiration and devotion were common in Krishna Murthy’s life and he wore all of them very lightly.

During his quarter century of active life as a leader and teacher, Krishna Murthy groomed several youngsters, treated all of them with love and attention reminiscent of an ancient gurukula. He was also instrumental in the establishment of the Kuchipudi Kalakshetra at Kuchipudi and served as its Principal until 1965. Among his several illustrious disciples, mention must be made of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, Vedantam Rattaiah sarma, Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma, Pasumarthi Seetharamaiah, Yamini Krishna Murthy, Lanka Annapurna and Sumathi Kaushal.

In his later years, Chinta Krishna Murthy served the cause of Kuchipudi kalapams and yakshaganas by carefully editing them and getting them recorded at the All India Radio, under the stewardship of Mangalampalli Bala Murali Krishna and Rajanikanta Rao. The plays were set to traditional music by Krishna Murthy. The choreography to suit the edited version was supplied by Oleti Venkateswarlu, a veteram musician. The plays thus recorded are *Usha parinayam*, *Sasirekha parinayam*, *Rama natakam*, *Golla kalapam* and *Bhama kalapam*. Krishna Murthy thus gained a permanency for the plays that he cherished so closely all through his life. Bala Murali Krishna, Srirangam Gopalaratnam, M.V.Ramana Murthy, P.Surya Rao, Dwaram Bhavanarayana Rao, N.C.P. Jagannadhacharyulu, Paturi Madhusudana Sastry, Mulukutla Sadasiva Sastry, Bhagavathula Seetharama Sarma,

Pasumarti Anjaneyulu and Pasumarti Seetharamaiah participated in the AIR recording of the plays.

Krishna Murthy was also involved in the venture of preparing a new yakshagana, *Ksheerasagaramathanam*. The play was financed by the A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi with Vempati Chinna Satyam as the director and Chinta Krishna Murthy as the Sutradhara, Yamini Krishna Murthy as Viswa Mohini, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma as Vishnu and Dhanwantari, Mahankali Satyanarayana as king Bali, Vendantam Prahlada Sarma as Indra, Pasumarthi Rattaiah as Laxmi and Mahankali Srimannarayana as Vasuki. The play was a turning point in the history of Kuchipudi, for it paved the way for later-day Nritya Natikas.

The production, with PVG Krishna Sarma, Kumari Jyotishmati and Bhagavatula Seetharama Sarma as co-singers and Krishna Murthy as the Sutradhara who also led the team with nattuvangam, was an immediate success. It had several performances not only in Andhra, but in Madras and New Delhi and with the finances collected through the performances, the Siddhendra Kalakshetram could acquire some land in Kuchipudi and also build the Venkateswara Bhavanam.

Thus Krishna Murthy lived a life completely devoted to the well-being of Kuchipudi and had been a strong upholder of traditional values both in life and art. A guru endowed with excellent qualities of mind and heart, Chinta Krishna Murthy passed away on August 31, 1969 and Kuchipudi yakshagana as well as Kuchipudi stewardship had become poorer.

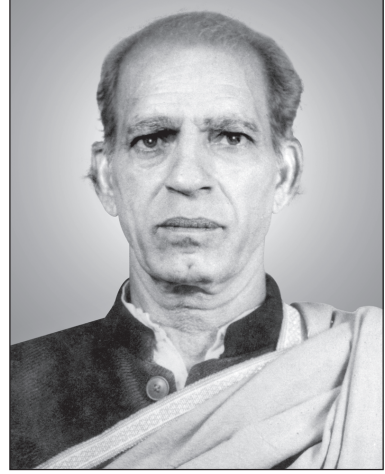
Though all these achievements were unique, Krishna Murthy never claimed these as his own, but always made Venkatarama Natya Mandali, the Kalakshetra and the whole village as the true functionaries. This humility has gained for him several friends all over the country.

Krishna Murthy's active life and dramatic career devoted to Kuchipudi yakshagana did not receive the credit it deserved. He was the architect of Kuchipudi's revival and Kuchipudi's all-

India recognition and fame. A humble man, with simplicity as his major quality, Krishna Murthy gained for Kuchipudi a formidable place in the map of artistic India.

Mahankali Satyanarayana (1903 - 1977)

Mahankali Satyanarayana, born to Sreeramulu at Kuchipudi in 1903, started his dance education very early in life. The children of that period were singularly fortunate since they had an opportunity to study under the two great contemporary dance gurus - Vempati Venkatanarayana, the finest exponent of Bhama kalapam and Chinta Venkataramaiah, the progenitor of yakshagana. Later, when Venkatanarayana passed away in 1935, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was available to train children in the *abhinaya* patterns. Very early in life Satyanarayana had undergone *abhinaya* training under Vempati and while acquiring mastery in performing Bhama kalapam, Golla kalapam, *Dadinamma* and other dance items soon became adept in doing child roles.



Satyanarayana later went to Vedantam Chalapati, the man who had mastered the female roles like Chandramati, Seetha and Leelavathi for special training in female impersonation and joined the Vedantam vari Melam. He later studied 'abhinaya vidhanam' from Guru Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry. His wide-ranging training put Satyanarayana in good stead in later years to do any role that was required of him.

Satyanarayana's debut on the stage at the age of eleven as

Prahlada with Hari Chalapathi as Hiranyakasipa, Chinta Audinarayana as Leelavathi and with Chinta Venkataramaiah as the Sutradhara was a momentous occasion. He did the role so well that for the next one decade he had to do the role of Prahlada, though he felt he became a little old for the role. It was in 1916 he joined the Vedantam troupe where he had the utmost exposure both in male and female roles. Even at a very young age he could synthesize the several dance arts he learnt from various masters : *laya* from Vempati Venkatanarayana, *abhinaya* from Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and yakshagana characterization from Chinta Venkataramaiah and soon became a 'total' artist and a performer of immense potentialities.

Under very particular circumstances, he had to put on the role of Hiranya kasipa after Hari Chalapati's sudden demise and since then had to do all the *uddhata* roles such as Hiranya kasipa, Banasura, Kamsa, Bali Chakravarthi, Viswamitra and Veerabahu, Ghatotkacha and Duryodhana. For over three decades he thrilled, entertained and created a sense of fear among impressionable audiences with his *uddhata cari-s*, with his ferocious make-up and appearance, with his fearsome facial expressions and has gained the epithet, "Yakshagana Chakravarti".

Satyanarayana's *pravesa daruvus* themselves are very striking, for he did not merely dance the song, but rendered the song with specific articulations. One could mention his entry song for Veerabahu, the drunken burial-ground keeper, "Veera Bahu nene, ghana Veeraadhi, dheeraati dheeruda". He sang the song with all the ferociousness it required, but singing the *raga*, he would falter; his steps moving hither and thither, bringing the whole house into laughter. Playing on the 'dappu' he would sing the song "tolagi ponindayya, doralu, peddintonni" and follow it up with *jatis* "tam dindakita dinda tam" and synchronise his dappu playing with the sounds of the mridangam, which would thrill the audience. He would be Yama with Darbha Venkateswarlu as his Chitragupta in *Mohini Rukmangada*, Ghatotkacha in *Sasirekha Parinayam*, with his action - oriented entry (not a *pravesa daruvu* as in other

plays) “Evadura, Na Vanamu jochina vadevarura” easily encapturing audience’s attention.

By 1938, Satyanarayana started a separate troupe, “Mahankali vari Melam”, with Pasumarthi Kondala Rayudu, Pasumarthi Anjaneyulu, Chinta Audinarayana, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma and Kothari Sriramulu and the team was further strengthened by the joining of Vedantam Raghavaiah and Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry. It was a treat to see this troupe’s *Usha Parinayam* with Satyanarayana as Banasura, Kondala Rayudu as Aniruddha, Raghavaiah as Usha and Pasumarthi Subrahmanyam as Chitra-



Mahankali Satyanarayana as
Banasura

rekha. Satyanarayana and Raghavaiah paired as Rukmangada and Mohini, as Hiranya kasipa and Leelavathi respectively and their combination was much appreciated, for they were able to express two distinctly separate and opposed sentiments in their finest way and would open up the contrasting *tandava* and *lasya* modes of dance very meaningfully.

Satyanarayana was an old timer as far as make up and ornamentation were concerned. He inherited his father’s ‘ganiyam’ - with the ‘haataka kundalamulu’, ‘kanchana bhujakeertulu’ an impressive crown, etc. He often said that putting them on was the way he paid back his debt to his father and to his ancestors. Though critics said that his Hiranya kasipa character was always endowed with loud oath taking to kill his enemy and move around the stage with thumping footsteps and was one-sided (showing only his

anger against Vishnu and not his love for his son, Prahlada) he would say that he used “accelerated annoyance at his son’s adamant nature” and his *vachika* accordingly oscillated between anger and kindness.

Satyanarayana was fortunately endowed with the physique that his *uddhata* characters required. Well-built with a broad, expressive face and a booming loud voice he just fitted into the roles he played. He was groomed by Chinta Venkataramaiah and continued to be an important member of the Venkatarama Natya Mandali since it started in 1951 and acted with three generations of actors. His last stint as Banasura for Vedantam Sathyanarayana Sarma’s Usha was always a thunderous success.

Even in later years he acted in the role of Bali in *Ksheera Sagara Madhanam* with Yamini Krishna Murthy who acted as Mohini in the yakshaganam. Critics commented that in the very *pravesa daruvu*, “Koluvu deere asura Chakravarti Bali Vimala Keerthi” followed by the *jatis* in several *gati* bhedas, the play had moved towards definite success. *Ksheerasagamathanam* was a milestone in Kuchipudi yakshagana history.

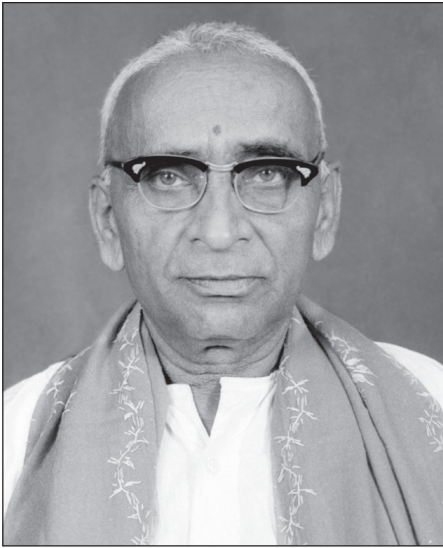
Another incident the old-time Kuchipudians remember was when Shanthi Dev Ghosh of Shantiniketan, an eminent dancer, visited Kuchipudi on the 18th of June, 1956 and the Venkatarama Natya Mandali presented *Usha Parinayam* in his honour with Satyanarayana as Banasura and Vedantam Sathyam as Usha. The performance was so well received that Shanti Dev was overwhelmed with delight and hugged Satyanarayana and bowed to him in reverence especially when he was acting out the *daruvu* “Vedalenasura jaladhi somulu dikpathulanencha...” when he enumerated the devaganas and turned to the eight ‘sides’ (dikkulu) of the earth to summon the lords of these ‘sides’ invoking appropriate weapons. When complimented for his diligent portrayal, Satyanarayana would bow with reverence and comment that it was all due to the teaching and blessing of his gurus.

Satyanarayana's last performance of *Usha Parinayam* was on August 25, 1977 when he played Banasura and endorsed the age-old truth that there was no difference between Siva and Kesava and it was only appropriate that a Saivite's daughter, Usha, the daughter of Banasura, an avowed enemy of Krishna, should marry Keshava's progeny and a happy Satyanarayana responded to a reviewer's enquiry that such unity was what he saw in this ancestral art of Kuchipudi. Hardly five days after the show, on August 30, 1977 Satyanarayana passed away and a chapter in the history of Kuchipudi had come to an end, though actors like Vedantam Rathaiah Sarma had imbibed the spirit of Mahankali Satyanarayana and tried, in their own way, to immortalise the characters created by their ancestors and perpetuated by a series of committed artistes of Kuchipudi.

Early in life Satyanarayana founded, with other Kuchipudi colleagues, "Lalitha Kala Mandali" and tried to train the next generation of yakshagana actors⁹. He was always of the opinion that Kuchipudi's Natya mela was specifically important in the Indian dance context since no other dance form combines dance and singing together and it was made obligatory. He paid tributes to his music teacher, Challapalli Seetharamaiah, who, he said, taught his students as to how each of the characters in a yakshagana used song to interpret the character. That great tradition is lost to us today and people equally proficient in dance and song like Sathyanarayana might become mere antiques of a bye-gone tradition!

Darbha Venkateswarlu (1913 - 1993)

Born to Chinta Narayana Murthy and Seethamma in 1913 at Kuchipudi, Darbha Venkateswarlu was adopted by Darbha Gopalam, a co-brother of Narayana Murthy. Venkateswarlu truly represents the old-time performance pattern of the Kuchipudi tradition: child roles when young ; secondary female roles when growing into adulthood, henoine's or hero's roles when in prime,



and take up character roles a little later. Venkateswarlu was one of the few who proved worthy of each role that he adorned and consistently helped the Kuchipudi banner afloat.

A man of many talents, Venkateswarlu had his early lessons in dance from his father Narayana Murthy and his father's elder brother, Chinta Venkataramaiah and was groomed to be a part of the yakshagana repertory. He, in the prime years of his life, adorned the roles of all the important lead characters : viz., Rama, Laxmana and Bharata in *Rama natakam* and in *Prahlada* all the character roles including Chandamarka, Jetti and the snake charmer - roles that Chinta Venkatamaiah donned earlier. In *Sasirekha parinayam*, he did the role of Sri Krishna, in *Rukmangada* of Chitrugupta, in *Usha parinayam* first as Chitrarekha, the confidante of Usha and then as Krishna and Shiva. One remembered even today his role as 'Chopdar' in *Usha* and the individual flavour he endowed the character with. In later years when the Venkatarama Natya Mandali was active, he was an active member in it and was also its treasurer for long. Later he did both the important roles in *Vipranarayana* - as Srinivasa and as the Chola king with equal alacrity.

In later years, when he knew that he was no more fit to take up the hero roles, Venkateswarlu wanted to withdraw from acting, but two or three roles in which he excelled all other actors in living memory forced him to continue. Interestingly they are secondary roles to which he brought the primacy and individuality of a major role.

One such was Chitrarekha in *Usha Parinayam*. As the understanding and sympathetic confidante of Usha, he appeared in a female role, transforming his demeanour. From the entrance song “Vedale Kumbhandu putri” in Sahana *ragam*, he traversed several emotions as the personal maid and friend of the heroine. An interesting scene in *Usha Parinayam* is Usha choosing her would-be husband looking at the paintings of the grooms. With tact and good humour, Chitrarekha makes the scene a lively one and when Usha swoons, she becomes a nurse, showing sympathy to her friend. Another role was that of Srinivasa, the disciple of Vipranarayana in the yakshagana of that name. His punch on words, subtle comments on Devadevi and his helpless anger at her seemingly bewildering advances towards his guru, Vipranarayana, made the role a source-book of fun and frolic. He was equally remarkable as Nakshatraka in *Harischandra*.

The most important character to which Darbha brought a dignified individuality is that of Madhavi in *Bhama Kalapam*. Even



Lekha vrittantam: Vedantam Satyam as Bhama and Darbha Venkateswarlu as Madhavi in **Bhama kalapam**

when he was past his age, audiences insisted that he should play the role because Darbha brought to it - each time he played the role - a vivacity and excellence that went into the making of the character of Madhavi. He traversed between the earthly world of Satyabhama and the heavenly world of Krishna always aiming to take her “nechelli” (dear friend) to the other world, not as a proud paramour but as a devout person who surrendered herself to the *Paramatma*.

During the earlier years of Venkatarama Natya Mandali it had resorted to performing stage plays as they were very popular during the thirties and forties of the last century. It chose three plays - two adaptations of their yakshaganas into stage plays - *Harischandra* and *Mohini Rukmangada* and added a new play to their repertoire : *Pandava Udyogam and Vijayam* of Tirupati Venkata kavulu. The last play already popular with specialist star-cast on the theatrical stage, but the Kuchipudi troupe equalled every other group with its performances, if not excelled. Chinta Krishna Murthy as Sri Krishna and Darbha Venkateswarlu as Arjuna proved their mettle with their understanding of the text, its nuances and the much acclaimed stresses and pauses in *vacika*. Their performances were lauded both by discerning connoisseurs and critics.

Throughout his life Darbha had been an active participant in all the yakshaganas and kalapams and endeared himself to one and all. Though he performed all the roles he was given with equal sense of responsibility - and brought to each one a “feather-touch” smoothness - an excellent trait in actors of the highest calibre alone - his choice always fell on two roles : as Lakshmana in *Rama natakam* and as Madhavi in *Bhama kalapam*. Both are, in a way secondary roles though vastly dissimilar in range and effectiveness and in interpreting them, Darbha showed such an originality that the inner traits of the character are opened up before us with all their hue and colour. “This is how a brother should be” is the thought he would ‘import’ into the audience. Darbha as Lakshmana

brought into the play two varying emotional angles of the character. Firstly, there is that succinct obedience of a younger brother to the elder. Darbha would not only feel it but would proclaim it loudly through the *daruvu* “choodare Srirama chandrula, Choodare manamuna” (“Envision Srirama, the Lord, through your mind’s eye”). When Chinta Krishna Murthy was Rama, it looked as though Darbha was showing real love and respect to his real-life brother (Chinta Krishna Murthy was the son of Chinta Venkataramaiah and Darbha, the son of Chinta Narayana Murthy, the fourth of the sons, thus both of them are first cousins) and in contrast, the command he got from his esteemed brother was to leave Seetha in the forests, a task too cruel to perform. In the *daruvu* “Ayyayo! Ee anyaaya metu sethu Rama Rama....” (how can I perform this cruel act, oh Rama!) Darbha makes a subtle contrast between his earlier stance of a devoted brother to the latter act of cruelty. This kind of a contrast within a character’s early and later behavioural patterns is superbly brought out by Venkateswarlu.

Darbha is one of the few among mid-century actors in Kuchipudi who had constantly developed - unknowingly perhaps - a super objective to his role and never deviated from it. His role as Madhavi is a case in point. The character has been given some titillating dialogues of sarcasm and humour ; but beyond that, an yearning to make Satyabhama see the divine characteristics of Krishna is Darbha’s own interpretation of it and he executed it with meticulous care and intellect. This gives to Madhavi’s character a unique double-edged sharpness with all the “double-entendres” falling into their places and rises the character of Madhavi into an ennobling friend and benefactor.

Darbha Venkateswarlu is also remembered for his heartening work in the contemporary political theatre very early in his life. He choreographed a political ballet “Kripp’s Rayabaram” for the Praja Natya Mandali (1944). He was under threat of arrest by the then British Government. In fact the police took him into custody, but let him off with a warning as he was found to be a



Darbha was a game for any role. He is seen here as Vinayaka with Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma and Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma as torch bearers.

minor at the time. But Darbha had, all through his long and eventful life, had that patriotic zeal in him and he shared very intensely the traditional values of Kuchipudi.

It looks bewildering to find an artist who acted with two generations of well-known Kuchipudi actors. He acted with Chinta Rama Murthy and Krishna Murthy, with Mahankali Satyanarayana and his son Sreeramulu; he acted with Chinta Audinarayana and in *Bhama Kalapam*, with Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry and for long with Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma.

Very few Kuchipudi artists were as devoted to their profession as Darbha Venkateswarlu was. Similarly, very few were as simple and understanding as he was! Darbha remains to be the very epitome of professional excellence with utmost human concerns that could be found not only in Kuchipudi but in Telugu theatre itself.

Pasumarthi Kondala Rayudu (? - 1958)

The yakshagana actors of Kuchipudi show a peculiar lineage. Every generation has at least two lead male actors, one or two female leads, one or two actors to play *uddhata* roles and three or four to play secondary male and female roles. Kondala Rayudu was a lead actor for almost two decades. Born to Laxmi Narasamma and Chalapati, Kondala Rayudu had his early training in dance from Chinta Venkataramaiah and



Rama Murthy and musical training from Marti Seetharamaiah, a veteran musician from Vijayawada with a perfect, mellifluous and stage voice. Kondala Rayudu did justice to the most important *dheerodatta* characters he had to don including Aniruddha, Devendra, Harischandra and Srikrishna. He was known more as a *sattvika* actor, for he knew exactly how a *bhava* could be well expressed through word, song and poem. Among all the roles he donned, his own preference was to that of Harischandra which he portrayed with great understanding and sobriety.

Kondala Rayudu's career during the early days started with Chinta vari Melam. But when the Mahankali vari Melam did not have a male lead, he was requested to shift to that melam tentatively, which he did. In 1952, when all the Kuchipudi melams dwindling and financially weak caught hold of the opportunity of starting one group under the banner, Venkatarama Natya Mandali, no one was happier than Kondalarayudu himself. He was very close to Chinta Rama Murthy for both of them belonged to the same batch of students under Chinta Venkataramaiah, Krishna Murthy, being three years younger.

A touching incident was narrated to me by Shri Vedantam Prahlada Sarma that on the first death anniversary of Chinta Venkataramaiah and on the day when Venkatrama Natya Mandali (with that name) was founded, Kondala Rayudu was about to do the role of Harischandra. He was in full costume. Everyone of the actors started paying their respects to the departed soul. Kondala Rayudu, who was very close to the family and especially to his maternal uncle, Venkatramaiah, came near Chinta's portrait, took off the crown he was wearing, put it on the table near the portrait and prostrated before the portrait, saying (nay, crying) "Oh! Mama! (oh, uncle!), you have lived with your yakshaganas for 50 years and made Kuchipudi yakshagana live for another 50 years!" Every one in the congregation wept that night. Kondala Rayudu was at his best in playing the role of Harischandra. In poems like "Maya Meya Jagambe" and "Arayan....." he reminded one and all of the glory of Kuchipudi during the days of Chinta Venkataramaiah¹⁰.

Pasumarthi Kondala Rayudu, whose *kedara gowla* and *kambhoji* are still the talk of the village, died in 1958, leaving behind him many contemporaries for whom Kondala Rayudu stood as the very symbol not only of good acting, but also of a humaneness and love for Kuchipudi as very few had.

Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry

(1917 - 2001)



Subrahmanya sastry, son of Magamma and Venkateswarlu was born in 1917 and started learning dance early in life from Vedantam Ramakrishnaiah and later from Chinta Krishna Murthy. After the initial years of apprenticeship Sastry did the child roles creditably and soon graduated into doing female roles of repute - Chandramati,



Subrahmanya Sastry as Mohini (?) in *Mohini Rukmangada*

Seetha, Subhadra and Usha. The delicacy with which he did the roles brought him special recognition and he soon became an important member of the Venkatarama Natya Mandali. He alternated with Vedantam Raghavaiah in donning the female roles and when Raghavaiah migrated to movies, Sastry became the sole performer of female roles.

Sastry's association with the Venkatarama Natya Mandali and its director, Chinta Krishna Murthy, was reminiscent of a perfect guru-sishya relationship, for he was available to the team whenever it required his services. Even at the time of the starting of Venkatarama Natya Mandali, he was helpful to Krishna Murthy. He and Pasumarthi Kondala Rayudu played a constructive role in consolidating the Mandali in its early years of sustenance.

Sastry was the force behind the annual celebrations of Siddhendra Yogi under the banner of Lalitha Natya Kala Mandali. He helped the Mandali to chalk out its programmes, to collect subscriptions and to conduct the festivals meticulously.

Subrahmanya Sastry later joined the Kuchipudi Siddhendra Kalakshetram as a staff member and served as an instructor teaching the fine art of female impersonation to young disciples. He passed away in August, 2001.

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VII

On Alien Shores, with Success : The Celluloid Experience

Introduction

From the traditional kalapams and yakshaganams to the solos and modern dance dramas, the transition in the Kuchipudi *nritya parampara* seems to be sudden and jumpy. But it is not so. Several performers and gurus introduced such innovations that this transition from time to time looks smooth. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's early experiments of solo and duet items, with one or two dancer-performers, apart from early one-dancer items like *tarangams* and *sabdams*, started the trend. Following him and also following the contemporary trend of such short choreographies elsewhere in the country a few young men from Kuchipudi ventured into presenting such one-dancer, two-dancer items which comprised both mythological and social themes and made a mark. These numbers thrilled the city and town audiences because of their newness, their short and crisp presentation, and also because of the short duration of each one of the numbers. In contrast with the leisurely pace of the kalapams and the cliched emotional entanglements shown in yakshaganas, these clusters of short pieces concentrate on new themes and a new technique that would go with each one of them. Each one is an entity by itself with a beginning, a middle and an end, thereby making each one an artistic whole.

This new trend, ushered in by Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry with Ayyanki Thandava Krishna and Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma forming a team, was followed vigorously and imaginatively by a three-member team, comprising of Vedantam Raghavaiah,

Vempati Peda Satyam and Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy. These dancers, already masters of the traditional format, started organizations, from time to time with different names and toured the entire state extensively.

These same people, now adept in choreographing and presenting solos and duets, have soon found other, more fascinating medium to work - the newly-emerging cinema. They joined the film field as dancers and became much sought-after and busy dance - directors. Vedantam Raghavaiah, among them, proved his mite by becoming an ace cinema director. Their efforts brought into focus such forms that have hitherto not been seen in the Kuchipudi art - a rich variety of variegated beauty.

Their “project of intermediacy”, generated to provide a meaningful venue for their creative endeavours and fair means of sustenance, have yielded good results and their “projects” helped them to be the leaders in their new and challenging profession in the field of cinema.

**“Bharata Kala Prapoorna”
Vedantam Raghavaiah
(1919 - 1971)**



Vedantam Raghavaiah was, for a whole generation of art lovers, the very epitome of Kuchipudi’s tradition and creativity. Raghavaiah came on to the Kuchipudi ferment when the old guard retired and the connoisseurs of classical dance wanted new and fresh faces to replenish artistic interest. Raghavaiah was an *eka santhagrahi*, a quick-learner, and

like his teacher Chinta Venkataramaiah, a strickler to perfection.

Born on June 8, 1919 at Kuchipudi to Vedantam Ramaiah and Annapura and into one of the most active families which, from at least two centuries, continuously upheld the dance tradition, Raghavaiah was initiated into dance at the age of six, under the tutelage of his maternal grandfather, Chinta Venkataramaiah. With a physique extremely suitable to demand attention and a mellifluous voice that attracted audiences of all ages, Raghavaiah soon became the cynosure of dance lovers, even when he was a boy of ten years.

Raghavaiah started his career, as all Kuchipudi boys did, by donning child roles, in which he was more profusely applauded than all his seniors who were then donning the major roles. In his seventh year, he played child Pahlada's role so well that the then British collector presented young Raghavaiah a gold medal with the British government's insignia imprinted on it.

Raghavaiah's elevation to full-fledged heroines' roles dawned a new era in the history of Kuchipudi in general and of Chinta vaari Melam in particular¹. His portrayal of Usha in *Usha parinayam* was a turning point not only for a revival of Kuchipudi yakshagana, but also in the life of Raghavaiah. Standing ovations, invitations for more performances, honouring with gold medals whenever and wherever he performed were more a rule than an exception. Stalwart performers hailed his female impersonation as "superb" and "memorable". The doyen of Harikatha and himself a great performer, Adibhatla Narayana Das, after witnessing Raghavaiah's portrayal of Usha, blessed him and said that he was born to be a "Saka Kartha" - the initiator of a New Era - and the era was rightly to be called the Era of Raghavaiah - Raghavaiah *yugam*².

Raghavaiah learnt all the nuances in the portrayal of *sringara nayikas* very early and had become a "must" to perform in such coveted roles as Usha, Mohini and Sasirekha. Venkataramaiah was so pleased with his performances and his devotion to the art form that they soon became a symbol of the

guru - sishya sampradaya. At the *garidi*, Raghavaiah's devotion all the time was to his guru, serving him with love and respect. On the stage the *guru* would taunt the *sishya* with suddenly - improvised *jatis* and the *sishya* would respond to them by dancing the *jatis* as though he had practised them for years! Raghavaiah's Usha, a *mugdha nayika* would haunt the audience for several days after the performance, due to Raghavaiah's extremely sensitive portrayal of *viraha*. His Mohini, an enchantress, similarly mesmerised the audiences. The Chinta vaari Melam, with Raghavaiah playing the major female roles had bookings continuously for months. In the 1938-39 season, they performed 38 *Usha Paninayams* in Guntur district alone in as many nights!

Raghavaiah's Usha was so popular that he was called "Usha Raghavaiah". He excelled in showing the sensitive nuances needed for the portrayal of a *mugdha* - innocence, intuitive emotional outbursts, bashfulness and loving taunts at her maid Chitrarekha - the entire spectrum of the multiple shades of *sringara rasa* was at Raghavaiah's command. Hari Chalapati's Banasura, Peda Satyam's or Prahlada Sarma's Chitrarekha added to the artistic wholesomeness of the play. It was a real *cakshusha kratuvu* - a feast not only to the eyes, but to the ears and the mind as well.

Though Raghavaiah's portrayal of the *sringara nayikas* was enchanting, he was equally adept in doing the roles of the angelic women of the yakshaganas - Leelavathi, Chandramati and Seetha. His intuitive understanding of the mood of the character enriched these portrayals and demanded the other actors in the play to respond in an equally expressive way. For almost two decades, Raghavaiah was at the centre of Kuchipudi yakshagana and Bhama kalapam performances.

In course of time, Raghavaiah started donning the lead male roles - Harischandra, Sri Rama, Rukmangada, Aniruddha, etc. He was equally felicitous in these roles as well. As he later said, an actor, who studied the situational needs of a character and responds naturally to them in the mould of the traditional characterization

is bound to succeed. That was Raghavaiah's approach to his characters, whether they be female or male. This transformation from female impersonation to male characterization seemed very natural to him. As Mahankali Satyanarayana said that was the test of greatness in a Kuchipudi actor³.

Young Raghavaiah, during the lean months of the performances received special training from Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry in *hastabhinaya* and *mukhajabhinaya*. This helped him in presenting the *vyasthamsas* (individual, solo items) like *padams*, *sabdams* and *tarangams* with ease and poise. In fact, Chinta Venkataramaiah specially trained Raghavaiah to dance to the "Balagopala *tarangam*". When it came to the *charanam* "Indira Mandira Bhakta" Raghavaiah was asked to dance on a brass plate with a potful of water on his head. This was to show how young boys, in their training, had to learn to balance their limbs - an advanced training lesson - and Raghavaiah was the first Kuchipudi dancer who presented it on the stage and it ever since became a coveted Kuchipudi item !

Raghavaiah's tenacity as a consistently imaginative dancer can be gauged when we learn that, as Usha, he had danced to one *daruvu*, "Anangudu ghanambatanchu aagrahinchene cheli ..." ("Manmadha with anger sent his arrows") for two hours showing Usha's varying reactions to Manmadha's five arrows - each arrow creating a different kind of evocation in her and the audiences thought that was the acme of the interpretative excellence of the best of the Kuchipudi artists !

Another important transformation contemporary audience observed in his presentation of Usha was that, in the *pravesa daruvu* ("Vedale Banuni varasuti") the tall and well-built Raghavaiah looked short and extremely graceful to fit into the docile and shy royal lady as Usha is. This bodily transformation was said to be Raghavaiah's special gift in female characterization.

The changing trends in Kuchipudi are never better illustrated than in the life of Vedantam Raghavaiah. While

constantly struggling to maintain high standards in the traditional Kuchipudi performances like the kalapams and the yakshaganams, Raghavaiah was also probing into the possibilities of finding his own idiom in the new structures of dance expression. The year 1934 stands as a melting pot of different ideas then being confronted by young Raghavaiah.

In 1934 Vimalendu Bose, the reputed Bengali dancer visited Machilipatnam with his small group and gave a recital. It contained new choreographies like “Siva Thandavam” and “Indra Nrityam”. The programme took the town by storm, partly because of the shortness of the pieces, because of the pace with which they were enacted and the rhythmic and mellifluous nature of the group’s involved presentation, but also because of the commentary of each item given by Mutnuri Krishna Rao, a highly respected editor of the weekly, *Krishna Patrika*. When, during the next week Raghavaiah came to present *Usha parinayam* at Machilipatnam, Srinivasa Chakravarti⁴, a well-respected cultural commentator asked Raghavaiah whether they would not do such pieces as Siva Thandavam and Indra Nrityam as the Bengali team had done, Raghavaiah’s answer was rather defensive. He said that his tradition was not to show an ensemble of individual items, but items that form a part of a whole dramatic story. He further said that doing solo items was like offering snacks, whereas their Bhagavatham was a fulsome meal !

However, Raghavaiah soon realized that there was a change in the taste of the audiences: they were preferring snacks of diverse tastes to a sumptuous meal. He was planning to start an association soon to cater to this new clientele - the urban audience. By the end of 1935 he started “Prabhakara Natya Mandali”; a very ambitious project was launched with thirty members, drawn from Kuchipudi and artists from non-Kuchipudi background also. Vempati Peda Satyam, Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy and Raghavaiah formed the core group, with Bokka Kumara Swamy, Bhagavathula Subba Rao, Pasumarthi Venkateswarlu and Nimmagadda Paradesi (a mridangist from the neighbouring village, Nangigadda) from

within the Kuchipudi fold and comedian Siva Rao, Peketi Sivaram and Sarasiruham from the contemporary theatre and started touring extensively.

Raghavaiah prepared a long list of dance pieces to be specially choreographed for this venture. The team also adopted some traditional items, lest they would be branded non-traditional. Dasavatara *sabdam*, a *tarangam* and an *ashta padi* from the traditional repertoire and newly choreographed items like “Radha Krishna”, “Gopi Krishna”, “Rangi-Rangadu”, “Siva Thandavam” etc. filled in a three-hour offering. Vempati Peda Satyam’s “Hunter’s Dance” and Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy’s *javalis* were special attractions.

Simultaneously Raghavaiah continued his participation in the traditional yakshaganams. In 1934 the Chinta vari Melam got a golden opportunity when they were asked to perform during the prestigious annual conference of Andhra Nataka Kala Parishath, the apex body of Telugu theatre activities, at Madras. The team performed *Usha Parinayam* on December 28, 1934 at Sri Bagh, the residence of



Raghavaiah in a female role

Kasinathuni Nageswara Rao Pantulu, the editor of the illustrious Telugu daily, *Andhra Patrika*. Raghavaiah was Usha. The play started at 6.30 P.M and ended at 9.30 p.m. A review in *Andhra Patrika*⁵, under the title “Bharata Natyam”, extolled the performance in general and Raghavaiah’s role in particular. The reviewer commented that though Raghavaiah was very young (he was hardly fifteen), it looked as though “he chiselled the art of Bharata Muni”. Especially commendable, the reviewer said, was the dream sequence in which Usha saw Anirudha and fell in love with him. The ecstasy of seeing the young man and the agony of not knowing who he was and the pangs of separation were enacted

in such a way that Raghavaiah stole the hearts of the audience. “Not a single head turned this way or that thinking that they would miss something precious”. His large and expressive eyes and every line of his brow responded to the emotions that were being presented.

When Raghavaiah, during the course of the play, also performed the *sloka*, “kanta yasyati,” an *ashta padi* and the famous Ramayana *sabdam*, the whole auditorium was exhilarated. The reviewer commented succinctly that Telugu people were all the time praising Bengali art and Bengali dance. But this dance of Raghavaiah was unparalleled. He reminded his readers that during the previous year the Madras audiences became crazy when they saw Rabindranath Tagore’s ballets ; but the reviewer asked : “Was there a single ballet that could come anywhere near the Kuchipudi yakshaganam as Vedantam Raghavaiah and his troupe performed?”

When the Chinta vari Melam performed *Usha Parinayam* at the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishath conference at Madras, Gudavalli Ramabrahmam, then a journalist and art lover, was one of the secretaries of the Parishath. He already knew Raghavaiah through a common friend, Samudrala Raghavacharya, a poet and lyric writer. Ramabrahmam was so greatly impressed by Raghavaiah’s *Usha*, that when he got a chance to direct a movie - “Rytu Bidda” - in 1939, he asked Raghavaiah to do a dance number in it (1941). That was the beginning of Raghavaiah’s three decade long career in the celluloid field in different capacities - first as a dancer, then as a dance director and finally as a director and producer.

Raghavaiah’s debut movie “Rytu Bidda” (The son of a farmer) was a great success in spite of severe opposition from the influential land lords of the day. Raghavaiah was recognized as a talented dancer. Since the need for a dance director was not thought of as important in the early days of Telugu cinema, Raghavaiah continued as a dancer in two more films - “Rukmangada” and

“Garuda garvabhangam”. When he finally got an opportunity as a dance director for movies like “Thyagayya” and “Balaraju”, Raghavaiah proved his mettle and settled down in the field as a much sought - after dance director.

Raghavaiah, along with other friends, started a cinema production company, Vinoda Films, and took to directing movies. His film “Devadas” with Akkineni Nageswara Rao and Savitri in the lead roles won the hearts of the Telugu audience and is today considered one of the ten best movies in Telugu. Raghavaiah became a much respected director in the field. He directed over fifteen movies among which box-office hits like “Suvarna Sundari”, “Aada Brathuku”, “Stree Sahasam”, “Balanagamma”, “Anarkali” and “Rahasyam” brought him both fame and money. Even in films, whenever an opportunity arose



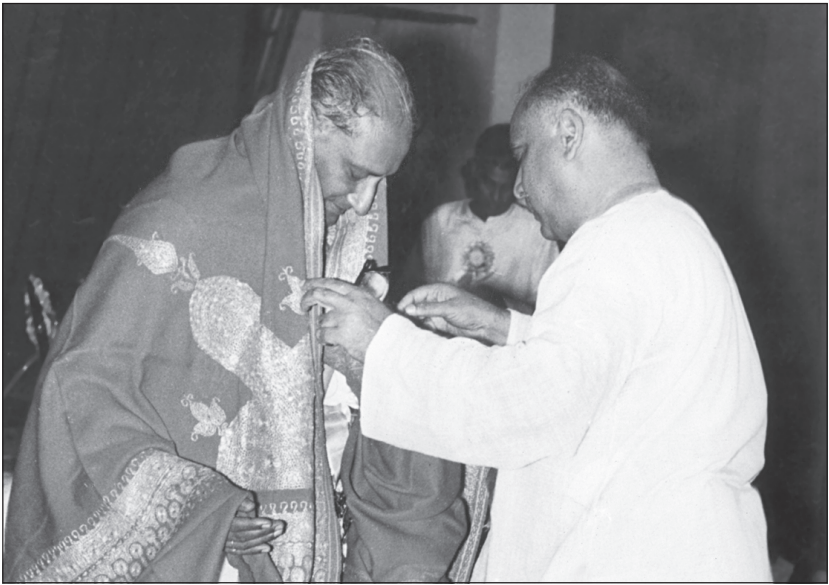
Raghavaiah in one of his early cinema performances



Raghavaiah as the Sutradhara in the yakshaganam “Girija kalyanam” in *Rahasyam*

he introduced at least one dance number with a strong Kuchipudi flavour. His choreography for “Girija Kalyanam” in the movie “Rahasyam” in the traditional yakshagana style is a classic example of the creative use of Kuchipudi dance in movies.

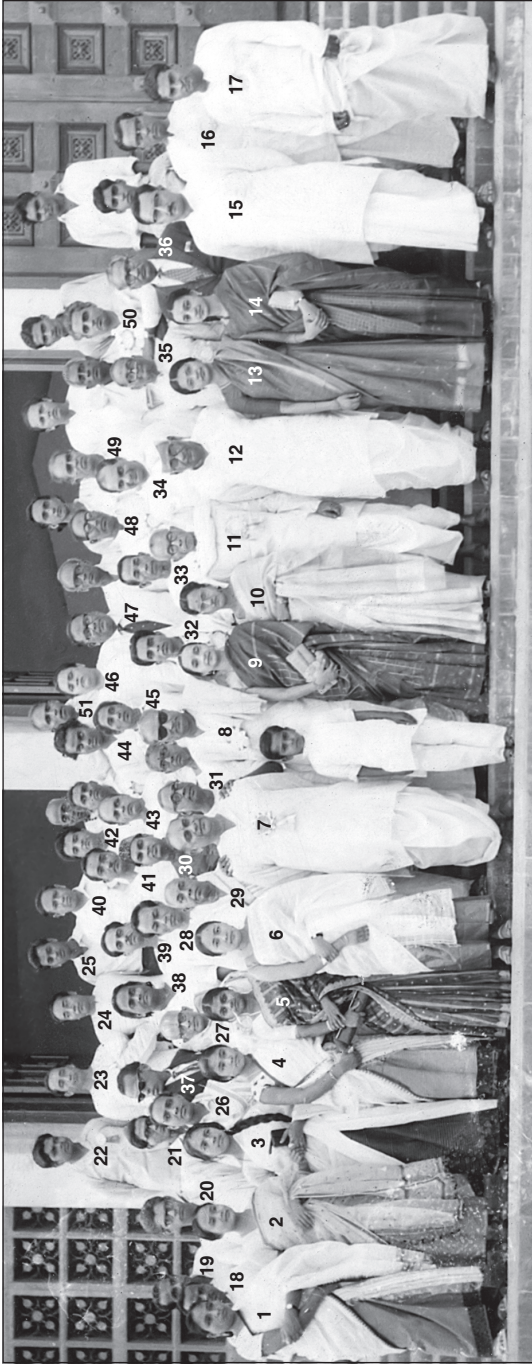
Raghavaiah's career as a dancer brought him many laurels and awards. He was the only Kuchipudi artist who was honoured by a representative of the then British government with a gold medal with the royal insignia imprinted on it. He was honoured with gold medals wherever he performed. Rajahs and Zamindars, governors and officials vied with each other to honour him. He was honoured by the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishath in its Madras session in 1934 and again in 1944 at its Machilipatnam session. The state Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured this Kuchipudi supremo with the title "Bharata Kala Prapoorna", the first dancer to receive this much honoured title. Because of his meritorious services to the art of dance, he was chosen to preside over the first All India Dance festival held at Hyderabad in 1964.



Raghavaiah being honoured with title "Bharata Kala Prapoorna" by Pasala Surya Chandra Rao, President of the State Sangeet Natak Akademi

Delivering his presidential address on March 14, 1964 at the All India Dance Festival⁶, Raghavaiah thanked his gurus and told the audience that this honour would really belong to them. He exhorted his fellow practioners (the list of the participants

Gurus and participants, All India Dance Festival, 1964 at Ravindra Bharati, Hyderabad.



Gurus, Dancers, State Akademi Functionaries after the closing session. Vedantam Raghavaiah was the president of the Festival. 1-6. Members of the Manipuri college group, 7.Pasala Suryachandra Rao, 8. Vedantam Raghavaiah, 9,13 &14. Jhaveri Sisters, 10. Damayanthi Joshi, 11.Guru Bipin Singh, 12.Cheif Minister K. Brahmananda Reddy, 15.P.V.G. Raju, Education Minister, 16.M.Anandam, 17.A.R.Krishna, 18-25.Kathak instrumentalists 26.Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, 27.Rallapalli Ananta Krishna Sarma, 28.M.Chandra Singh Pandit Achouba, 29.E.Krishna Iyer, 30.Potukuchi Sambasiva Rao, 31.Shambhu Maharaj, 32.P.V.G.Krishna Sarma, 33.Amobi Singh, 34.M.R.Apparao, 35.Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, 36.L.N.Gupta, 37.D.Y.Sampath Kumar, 38.Nataraja Ramakrishna, 39.Kavalam Narayana Panikar, 40-46.Kathakali group, 47.K.V.Gopala Swamy, 48.Chinta Krishna Murthy, 49. Mahankali Satyanarayana, 50. Chinta Radhakrishna Murthy, 51.Hari Punmayya
(The others could not be identified)



Vedantam Raghaviah delivering the inaugural address at the All India Dance Festival at Hyderabad. Seated on the dias are Nataraja Ramakrishna, Chief Minister Brahmananda Reddy and Pasala Surya Chandra Rao.

would look like a ‘who is who’ in the field of dance - Balasaraswathi, E.Krishna Iyer, the Jhaveri sisters with their teacher Bipin singh, Samjukta Panigrahi and her guru Kelucharan Mohapatra, Shambhu Maharaj and his young nephew Birju Maharaj and many more) that dance was a divine art and a “manasika yoga” and this ideal should be kept in mind while training youngsters or while performing.

Vedantam Raghavaiah brought national recognition to Kuchipudi. He always cherished his days as a dancer and remembered his gurus with gratitude. His varied and successful career came to an end when he passed away on 9th of October, 1971 at Madras.

Vempati Peda Satyanarayana (1922-1982) (Peda Satyam)

Born on December 5, 1922 at Kuchipudi to Vempati Subba Rao and Seethamma, Vempati Satyanarayana is often called “Peda Satyam” to distinguish him from Vempati (Chinna) Satyam, his uncle’s son. Though he was initiated into dance by his father when he was five years old, Satyam did not like to take dance as a profession. He wanted to go to a regular English school and become an



officer. He found the dance in his village too mundane and uninspiring. So he continued his studies in the local school, much to the embarrassment of his parents. The boy who would have had his initial performance in the Ramalingeswara temple, instead, passed out of his class with flying colours. But as ill-luck would have it, he had to stop his school education due to serious financial constraints. Even by then Satyam was known in the school for his merit in drawing. His drawing teacher, who was greatly impressed by his abilities, advised him to go to a professional artist to learn the art. He had to go either to Machilipatnam or Rajamundry for the purpose and his parents said that when they could not afford his school education in the village itself, how could they send him to far-off places. Satyam, who was then 14, did not know what to do. His parents persuaded him to start learning dance even at that age, when all the boys of his age had already started specializing in the “*Bhama vesham*”. His father saw his drawings, which mostly consisted of dance poses and told him that dance was in his genes. He joined Chinta Venkataramaiah’s “garidi” for his initial training in dance. With a determination to learn the art, he studiously worked his way up⁷.

Venkataramaiah's 'gurukulam' was an open place in front of his house, an open court-yard. Satyam liked the way teaching was imparted in this "open" school, when all the passers by would stop for a while, look at the boys practising and go away with a winnowing smile. Satyam felt elated when someone complimented him on his work. He would get up at 3 o' clock in the morning and be ready for his class at five. The coaching will go on in two shifts upto six in the evening. In the morning either Chinta Rama Murthy or Krishna Murthy would train the children in physical exercises, acrobatics and *adavus*. In the afternoon, the veteran elder Chinta Venkataramaiah would train them in character portrayal, starting with the child roles of Prahlada, Lohitasya, Lava and Kusa and the young Rukmangada. Though unwillingly, for he felt he was past that stage, Satyam learnt the roles meticulously and would even correct the youngsters.

For three years Satyam learnt dance studiously. He was known to be an intelligent student who could grasp things instantaneously and his painting abilities made his postures and poses delicate and graceful. He joined the Chinta vari Melam and was doing small female roles. His two-year senior, Vedantam Raghavaiah was then donning the heroine's roles. Satyam was disappointed at not being able to show his own expertise. Chinta Venkataramaiah, a shrewd psychologist, found the reasons for the agitating mind of the young man and advised him to join Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's troupe with the hope of finding suitable and innovative roles in solos and duets. Venkataramaiah personally took Satyam to Vedantam and recommended his case. Vedantam was at that time organizing small shows with a small group of youngsters. He would take an *ashta padi* or *padam* and choreograph it with two or three people and he would tour all over the state. What Satyam learnt at Venkataramaiah's gurukulam was not of much use here. As in yakshagana, there were no broad movements, no rhetorical speeches and no emotional outbursts. Everything was subtle and low-key. All the pieces are *abhinaya* - oriented, *sringara*- centred, mostly with much of *hasta* and

mukhajabhinaya. Satyam learnt the *abhinaya* soon and became adept in the short pieces. Jagannadha Sarma, Vedantam's son and a couple of others formed the team. They were mainly touring the districts all the time.

Even here Satyam felt disappointed. As the other members were senior to him, he was given insignificant items or less important roles to perform. Besides, the job of carrying the luggage of the group fell upon him, as he was the newest member. And the money shared by the team was hardly sufficient to make both ends meet. Satyam thought of quitting the job several times, but remembered his determination to remain in the dance field, come what may.

However, fate itself was unfavourable to him. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry could not manage tours and shows and asked the few members to find their own way. Again, Satyam was thrown on to the streets. He did not know what to do. He thought of joining the Chinta troupe again but things there remained as they were. Some elders in the village suggested that he should go and learn painting from Adivi Bapiraju, a veteran poet-painter-novelist, then the principal of the National college at Machilipatnam. He walked all the way from his village, about thirty kilometres, in the night and met Bapiraju. He showed him some of the drawings he had earlier done. Bapiraju was impressed. He took Satyam as a student and introduced him to a few Brahmin families who agreed to provide Satyam food. Satyam worked with devotion and he soon started painting portraits and landscape sketches.

One day Bapiraju returned from a dance programme and started extolling it. Suddenly he enquired from Satyam : "You are from Kuchipudi. Don't you know how to dance ?" Satyam, with a deep sigh, narrated the story of his dance training. "Would you show me some of your art?" asked Bapiraju. Satyam immediately tied his dhoti upto his knees and with an obeissance to the mother earth and to his gurus, exhibited his expertise in dance to Bapiraju, who sat non-plussed. He sat silently for a long time. Suddenly he

stood up and told Satyam that from that moment onwards, he was not going to teach him painting. Satyam was aghast. “Yes, you belong to your ancestral profession. With so much of talent in you, you should make a mark in it. I will do the needful and help you,” assured his art guru.

Satyam went back to his village and started attending the rehearsals of the yakshaganams, now actively practised under the guidance of Chinta Rama Murthy. Hitherto Satyam only learnt how to do a character. Now it dawned on him that he should know how the work of different actors got assimilated. From his painting background he knew how to compose different figures in an artistic way. He also knew how to relate the background to the characters in the foreground. He saw things in a new perspective.

Suddenly, one day, Satyam got a call from Adivi Bapiraju, not from Machilipatnam, but from Madras. Bapiraju was chosen the art director of a movie, “Meera Bai” (1940). There was a dance sequence in the talkie. Bapiraju asked the producers to see Satyam’s dance. He was called for. Satyam was chosen. The movie contained only one dance number - a “Kapalika dance” - and Satyam performed it to the satisfaction of the producers. Telugu movies did not yet have several dance numbers that would require a dance director. Satyam finished his work and went back to his village. He and Vedantam Raghavaiah, who had also come back after a similar assignment at Madras, struck on an idea of a small group - as that of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry - create short pieces of solos and duets and tour. Wherever they performed the two-hour programme, people responded very favourably. The two dancers, with a three member orchestra gave performances in schools, colleges, clubs and get-together functions. When Raghavaiah was away performing in yakshaganas or when he went to Madras to do dance numbers in movies, Satyam had no work. He was again disappointed with his idle life and in desperation wrote to Bapiraju.

Bapiraju asked Satyam to come to Madras again. He was introduced to Ram Gopal, the famous Bharatanatyam dancer who

was then running a school at Bangalore. Ram Gopal wanted Satyam to come to Bangalore and teach his group Kuchipudi. Satyam agreed and started his teaching work. His salary was Rs. 50 a month, which was hardly sufficient for his food. Instead, he had the advantage of intimately understanding the nuances of Bharatanatyam and Kathakali, the two dance forms that were being taught at Ram Gopal's institute. He started learning both these classical forms, while teaching Kuchipudi to the trainees! He found a new world opened up to him.

After a six month training programme, Ram Gopal and his team made plans for an all-India tour and Satyam was requested to accompany. They gave performances in several North Indian towns and finally reached Lahore for a fortnight's dance assignments. When they were scheduling the programmes, Satyam got a telegram from Vedantam Raghavaiah that Satyam should reach Madras immediately. Taking leave of Ram Gopal, Satyam came to Madras. Raghavaiah was launching a huge, 30-member team of Kuchipudi actors and singers, train them and tour the country extensively, as Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal were doing.

Raghavaiah and Satyam started preparing various one-man, two-men and group items and carefully practised them for a month. The first programme was presented in Madras and both the public and the press lauded the effort. They continued the programme under the banner of their old organization, "Prabhakara Natya Mandali⁸" and started touring extensively. Many of the dance items choreographed by Raghavaiah and Satyam included extensions of traditional Kuchipudi solos like the *ashta padis* and *javalis*. For example their "Radha Krishna" started with an *ashta padi*, and included traditional Telugu songs like "Madhura Nagarilo" and ended up with a group dance of Radha, Krishna and the gopikas. They restructured Golla kalapam as "Srishti Rahasyam". After six months, when young Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy joined the team, the *javalis* and *padams* became a "must" in the programme. Satyam was fond of choreographing modern themes and his "Hunter's dance" was a new innovation. It was a one-man



Peda Satyam as Usha in *Usha Parinayam*

mime show in which a hunter's life in the forest was depicted vividly, all with the assistance of three instruments, without any words, miming all the actions of the hunter.

Their Andhra tour was a great success. They were received enthusiastically by the dance-hungry towns of Andhra. These recitals were especially appreciated by young people in the schools and colleges and clubs. But as ill-luck would have it again, Raghavaiah had a call from Madras with a request to perform in movies. Almost at the same time, Satyam also got an invitation to work for a movie, "Bhaktimala" and he left for Madras. He found that he was designated as the "Dance Master" of the movie (which in later years, became "Dance Director") and Satyam was the first dancer to be called so in the entire South Indian industry. "Bhaktimala" was followed by Y.V.Rao's "Tahsildar" and Satyam was, in no time, became the most-sought after dance director and thus ended the dream project of the three aspiring Kuchipudi young men.

Satyam settled down in the cinema field and got recognition as a dance director. He worked as a dance director for more than 300 films. Some of them were big hits and some others were

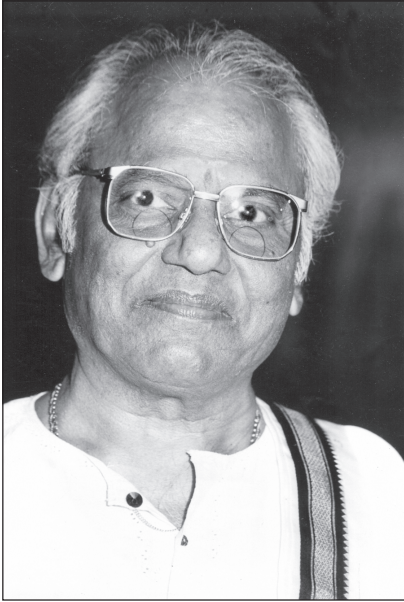
recognised as dance-oriented. Movies like “Nartanasala,” “Suvarna Sundari,” “Seetarama kalyanam,” “Sri Krishna Pandaveeyam” and “Pandava Vanavasam” earned both reputation and money. His dance numbers in “Rojulu Maaraayi” - especially the harvest song “Eruvaka sagero ranna sinnanna” - with Wahida Rahman as the dancer was a big , all - time hit. He brought into the field several dance stars such as Wahida Rahman, L.Vijayalaxmi, Raja Sulochana and Geetanjali. He also groomed his cousin, Chinna Satyam, to be an able dancer and choreographer.

Peda Satyam was honoured by several institutions all over the Madras state. He was honoured for his work in “Nartanasala” at the Jakarta International film festival. The Andhra Nataka Kala Parishath honoured him in 1958 in its twentieth session held at Gudivada.

Satyam’s dream of organizing a group of Kuchipudi dancer-actors to give public performances occasionally found encouragement. He started an organization in Madras called the “Kuchipudi Kalakendram” and did some programmes. He, Vedantam Raghavaiah and Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy were deeply involved in propagating Kuchipudi dance and organizing annual festivals at Kuchipudi under the banner “Lalitha Kala Natya Mandali”⁹. Vedantam Raghavaiah was always its patron and Satyam helped the organization to celebrate Siddhendra Yogi festival for five years. However, their busy schedules in movies did not permit them to be actively associated with the work.

In his later years Satyam went back to his village and started teaching at the Siddhendra Kalakshetram. This work gave him immense satisfaction. Unfortunately, a few months later, Satyam died on June 16, 1988 at Kuchipudi and a great aspiring soul was laid to rest. Satyam’s life reveals the hardships artists had to face in 1930’s and 40’s at a time when traditional arts were struggling to retain their importance and validity. But the poor, helpless artist had to take hard and unsavoury decisions which very often impeded his artistic desires!

Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy (1927-2004)



Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy¹⁰ is the very embodiment of the Kuchipudi *lasya* tradition, the highest achievement of which can be seen in the enactment of *Bhama kalapam* and in the *abhinaya* of *padams* and *javalis*. Krishna Murthy and the Kuchipudi dancers of his generation, in spite of their sound dance education, had to go through tumultuous moments of agony for their sustenance. Traditional Kuchipudi repertoire was looked down as uninteresting and mechanically repetitive.

The dancers had to relocate, find alternatives which would be welcome to the new generation of audiences. In the process, they were inspired to experiment with alternative modes of dance presentation, but before they could thoroughly exploit the new medium, they were called to yet another medium of entertainment, the cinema. Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy was one such and the youngest among these aspirants.

Born in Kuchipudi on November 12, 1925 to Pasumarthi Ramaiah and Adilakshmi, Krishna Murthy was groomed into dance at the very tender age of seven. His maternal grandfather was Chinta Venkataramaiah, the doyen of Kuchipudi yakshagana. On his paternal side, his grand father, Pasumarthi Seshaiyah was a well-known Pagati vesham exponent. His own father, Ramaiah, was a member of the Chinta vari Melam. It was into such dance - addicted family that Krishna Murthy was born and brought up.

Krishna Murthy's initiation into dance, though taken for granted as every young boy in Kuchipudi had a traditional obligation to be initiated so, was sudden. His parents sent him to a private school at the age of six and he completed one year there, learning rudiments. On the first day of the second year, Krishna Murthy was summoned urgently by his grandfather, Chinta Venkataramaiah, and on the same day was initiated into dance.

After the physical exercises and the preliminary *asanas*, he was taught the parts of young boys in yakshaganas. His very first role was 'Kusa' in *Rama natakam* and the young boy relished the role very much since there was a confrontation in the play between Lava and Kusa on one side and Laxmana and Rama on the other. He was happy because he could call his two uncles - Chinta Rama Murthy and Krishna Murthy - who were taking the roles of Rama and Laxmana - by names and talk to them in a ridiculing manner, which he would dare not do in real life. Slowly he started doing more important child roles - Prahlada and Lohitasya.

But even when he was learning these roles from his grandfather and his uncles, he was attracted to the dance programmes of that illustrious dance guru, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry. Vedantam was not yet a celebrated performer. He had no melam of his own and whenever an occasion arose, he would demonstrate several mudras - not only of moods and movements - but also of animals and birds. Besides performing *javalis* and *padams*, he was exceedingly creative in mimicking the actions of animals. For example, he would show how a cow drinks water : the head of a cow, its jaws and mouth, its mouth opening and closing - all the details of a single action and young Krishna Murthy was specially taken in for the veteran's exhibition of several shades of "shyness" in his *pada abhinaya*. In later years, Krishna Murthy was to incorporate some of these in his *abhinaya* of *padams* and *javalis*.

In 1937, when Krishna Murthy was twelve years old, he used to accompany his maternal uncles to neighbouring villages

and towns and perform two or three dance numbers. He was once taken to Nellore where he was asked to do a *javali*. Krishna Murthy chose a famous *javali*, “tattara pada nela.....” in which he had shown varied *mudras* for the one word “tattara” (fumble) and throughout the performance audience were shouting that they wanted to see more of “tattara Krishna Murthy!”

Within the next two years, Krishna Murthy graduated into doing a solo performance on his own, running for nearly two and a half hours. The repertoire contained items from Bhama kalapam, Golla kalapam and *Aadhyatma Ramayanam*, *tarangam*, *padam* and *javali*. His uncles felt this selection was the best among the traditional items grouped together into a single performance and whenever there was an opportunity, Krishna Murthy repeated the performance to the delight of varied audiences. The team consisted of his uncles Rama Murthy and Krishna Murthy, Vedantam Raghavaiah and himself. When Raghavaiah or Krishna Murthy performed pieces from Bhama kalapam his uncles were accompanying the programme with “nattuvangam” and also doing the role of Madhavi. In such small-cast performances, his uncles holding the *tala* and doing the role of Madhavi, were doing so from behind the curtain or from the side wings, since they were dressed in female costume to do their own chosen numbers!

During early 1940 Vedantam Raghavaiah, who thought he had ample time to devote to new modes of choreographies found in young Krishna Murthy a similar attitude. Peda Satyam, being away in Bangalore, both Raghavaiah and Krishna Murthy wanted to explore new avenues of dance expression. Under the auspices of Prabhakara Natya Mandali, both of them embarked on a project in which short pieces of about half an hour duration each would be presented. The emphasis, in the beginning, was on restructuring the traditional items like “Radha Krishna”, “Gopika Krishna”, “Srishti Rahasyam” and the like. They were “action songs” and both the dancers were adept in creating new and enjoyable “action songs”. Krishna Murthy’s enactment of the *ashtapadi*, “Priye charuseele” was always received with thunderous applause.

Later, two girls from Nangigadda, a neighbouring village, Pullamma and Subbulu who were insisting on joining the troupe used to perform in small roles, but very soon they had to be discarded because people started gossiping.

Very soon Vempati Peda Satyam joined them and the group widened their repertoire to include new items. Krishna Murthy's lasya-oriented dance numbers, Raghavaiah's restructured traditional songs and Satyam's solos, inspired by Uday Shankar and Ram Gopal, formed a day's bill. People welcomed the group for its innovative and wide-ranging items which completely deviated from the traditional Kuchipudi programmes.

The tours the group undertook were extremely successful. They performed at Bangalore and Mysore, at Madras and Thanjavur and in almost every town in Andhra. In Rajahmundry, they saw a veteran dancer B.V.Narasimha Rao performing a "yenki paata¹²" and that night the group improvised a dance number with another "yenki paata". They also included folk songs like "Chal Mohana Ranga". They also choreographed, for three of them, "a scavenger's dance," a piece that starts on a comic note but ends seriously extolling the role of scavengers, the harbingers of cleanliness which is the key to a nation's health.

They were also happy that at some places people would ask them to perform traditional items like Bhama kalapam. With these programmes all the three of them were recognised as the new crop of Kuchipudi dancers who were proficient in the tradition and at the same time conversant with the changing trends in the contemporary dance scenario. These tours gave the three young Kuchipudi dancers on opportunity to show to the world what they were capable of.

Soon Vedantam Raghavaiah and Vempati Peda Satyam got opportunities to be associated with the newly emerging cinema field. Krishna Murthy was left alone. But he did not keep himself idle. He gathered other young boys and with new action songs and folk songs he used to tour nearby villages. Those were the days when the Telugu movie "Balaraju" was released with

Vedantam Raghavaiah as the dance director. It contained dance sequences like “Teeyani Vennela Reyi”. The song and the dance went into the audience as no other song did at the time. Krishna Murthy started choreographing such tilting folk numbers and presented them.

When his two senior colleagues were making a mark in the movies, Krishna Murthy was also itching to join them. An opportunity came in 1945. For the Navaratri festival, a veteran actor P.Suri Babu came to Kuchipudi to perform the Telugu play, “Tara Sasankam”. Suri Babu was not only a well-known stage actor-producer, he was also into movie business. Krishna Murthy met him and introduced himself. He had also shown him the pamphlets of the programmes. Suri Babu was impressed by this young man’s potentialities and told him that he was just then producing a film, “Tulasi Das”. There was only one dance sequence in the movie and enquired whether Krishna Murthy was willing to compose dance for the song. Krishna Murthy readily agreed.

The movie was being shot at Salem. Krishna Murthy reached Salem. The one dance drama in the movie was to be enacted by children. B.N.R.¹³, a well-known stage and film music director who was in charge of music direction had composed music for the song. Since Krishna Murthy was already trained in composing dance to folk and light songs, it was not difficult for him to do the work. He composed the dance bits and trained the children. All the people concerned with the movie felt that the composition was good. Lanka Satyam, the director of the movie said that this boy would make a mark in the cinema field. He was just twenty years old. He finished his work in the movie and went back to Kuchipudi.

Lanka Satyam called him again to be the dance director of a Tamil movie he was directing, “Shenbagavalli”. Krishna Murthy went to Coimbatore for the purpose. There were quite a few dance numbers in the movie. Periya Nayaki, a renowned star of those days was the heroine. He composed five dance numbers for her and all of them were well received. Krishna Murthy was paid an

honorarium of one hundred and fifty rupees! A pleased Krishna Murthy announced that his first remuneration would certainly augur well for his future.

Krishna Murthy shifted his residence from Kuchipudi to Madras. In his leisure time he used to call his colleagues from Kuchipudi and do the traditional yakshaganas with them. He used to compose new postures and new combinations and that was appreciated by the Madras audiences. Under the banner of their old organization he rechoreographed the traditional play *Usha Parinayam* and presented it at the Museum theatre. B.N.Reddi, the famous movie director happened to see this production and was so pleased with Krishna Murthy's work that he offered him the dance direction of his forthcoming movie, "Malleswari", which was later hailed as a classic.

Krishna Murthy did not look back again because with that movie he was recognised as a talented dance director. During the fifty years he was in the cinema field, he worked as a dance director for over 400 movies, noteworthy among them being "Maya Bazar", "Patala Bhairavi", "Gunasundari katha" and "Missamma" - all of them box-office hits. In "Maya Bazar" the dance song "Aha Na Pelliyaanta" was an all-time hit. He also did "Mohini Bhasmasura"

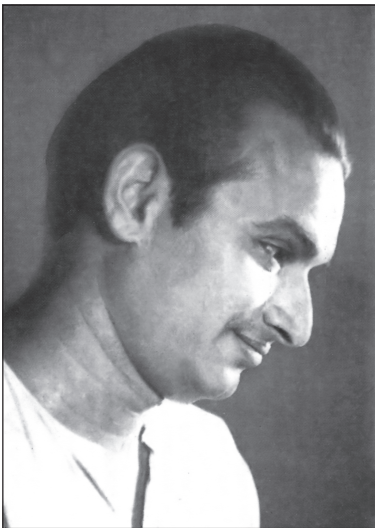


A dance sequence from the Telugu film 'Mayabazar' in which Krishna Murthy choreographed in Kuchipudi and Kathakali styles

in the same movie with Kathakali and Kuchipudi styles pleasantly alternated. Krishna Murthy worked as the dance director of the prestigious cinema production company of Vauhini - Vijaya¹⁴ productions and was the dance director of all their productions in all the languages. He also directed the dance numbers of several stars of the day including Jayalalitha, Sri Devi, K.R.Vijaya and Bhanumathi. Besides, he also gave dance training to many of these stars.

Krishna Murthy's was an eventful life. He was treated with respect by the film industry and he gave his best to it in return. His only regret in later years was that he could not pay back his debt to Kuchipudi for he strongly believed that he owed all his name and fame to his village and the great masters who taught him. In the last years he wanted to go back to Kuchipudi and spend his last days there peacefully, but could not do so due to professional obligations. Krishna Murthy passed away on August 8, 2004 at his Madras residence, having spent his last years in spiritual meditation.

Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma (1922-1982)



Jagannadha Sarma was the son of the illustrious guru and performer Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, the savant who heralded a new age of *abhinaya* in Kuchipudi dance. Trained by his father since childhood, Sarma soon became adept in donning the roles of female characters, especially Satyabhama. He was one of the few who knew the entire repertoire of Kuchipudi, thanks to his father's initiative and could dance all the items from

Bhama kalapam to *Adhyatma Ramayanam* and *padams*, *tarangams* and *javalis*. Born in 1922, Sarma had opportunities to perform widely during his younger days.

It was in 1940 that a new urge to search for our own roots had borne fruit and the tours that Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, Ayyanki Thandava Krishna and Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma both in Andhra and in several cities outside were so well received that there started a new age in the receptive modes of Telugu audience. The three - member team impressed none other than the maestro Uday Shankar



Ayyanki Thandava Krishna and Jagannadha Sarma in a dance sequence

and the team was given tumultuous reception wherever it performed. The usual numbers that went into a production of this three member team would be an extended *ashta padi*, a rehash of the “Pravesa daruvu” of Bhama kalapam, and a *tarangam* or a *padam*. The tour was a great success and Sarma was showered with encomiums. This emboldened Sarma to start a school to impart training in Kuchipudi dance at Rajahmundry, an important cultural centre in Andhra. The school was called “Nartana sala¹⁵”.

However, Sarma had to wind up the school after an year because he got a job as a dance teacher at Kesari High school, Madras. He also got an opportunity to work in movies as a dance director. Sarma used both to his advantage. After working for an

year as a dance teacher, he left it and remained to be a prominent dance director in movies.

Jagannadha Sarma choreographed dance for over fifty movies in several languages - Telugu, Tamil, Kannada and Oriya. His first picture was “Babhruvahan”. He was dance director to such movies like “Chenehulaxmi”, “Ilavelpu”, “Rani Ratnaprabha”, “Bangaru Papa” and so on.

Sarma is an imaginative choreographer both on the stage and in the movies. Since he was experienced in the different formats within Kuchipudi, dance direction in movies was not particularly difficult for him. He had a flair for visual composition and took care to maintain aesthetic balance between the dancers and their environment. However, his commitments took him to Hyderabad where he started an institution called “Kuchipudi Kalakshetram” and started training students. His students included Sumati Kaushal, Krishna kumari, Santi Vedantam, Shanti Akella, Uma Bharati, Usha Gayatri and K.Vijayalaxmi, all of them hailed as important dancers of the time.

Sarma re-choreographed several of the traditional Kuchipudi yakshaganas for his disciples, including Bhamakalapam, *Usha parinayam* and *Mohini Bhasmasura*. He also travelled abroad to conduct the programmes of his disciples.

Jagannadha Sarma was honoured with several titles and awards such as Natyacharya and Nritya Vidwan Mani. He was a member of the A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi for a term and served as a member of the committee for preparing syllabus for Kuchipudi courses.

Sarma was honoured by the A.P. Sangeeta Natak Akademi with the title “Bharata Kala prapoorna” in the year 1980. He passed away in October, 1982.

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2. Personal notes of Bh.L.Narasimham handed over to me.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Srinivasa Chakravarti, *Natya Kala*, December 1971, p.14.
5. “Bharaty Natyam”. Review of Vedatam Raghavaiah’s performance, *Andhra partika* (daily), December 29, 1934.
6. Vedantam Raghavaiah, “Presidential address,” *Natya Kala*, (Nriyankamu), April 1964, p.p. 151-152.
7. “Tera Venuka” (Behind the curtain), Interview with Peda Satyam, *Vijaya Chitra*, March 1967, p.18.
8. “Prabhakara Natya Mandali,” was started by Vedatam Raghavaiah in which Peda Satyam, Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy and other Kuchupudi artists were members.
9. “Lalitha Kala Natya Mandli” was started under the presidentship of Peda Satyam on 24.12.1949. Bhagavathula Ramalinga Satry was the local president and Mahankali Laxminarasimham was its secretary. Under the guidance of Peda Satyam Siddhendra Yogi Jayanthi Festivals were conducted from time to time at Kuchipudi. See *Sri Lalitha Kala Natya Mandali Souvenir*, 1952 which covered the details of the festival conducted between 24-12-1949 and 26-12-1949. It also started a branch in Madras on July 20, 1954. See for details *Andhra Patrika* (daily), July 22, 1954.
10. “Gnapakalu,” (Reminiscences), *Andhra Jyothi* (Sunday edition), August 22, 2004.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Yenki Paatalu*, written by Basavaraju Apparao, are love songs of rare lyrical beauty and rural simplicity. They describe the uninhibited love life of Yenki and Nayudu Bawa, two rural lovers.
13. Bheemavarapu Narashima Rao (popularly called B.N.R.) was a well-known harmonist for a famous theatre group, Ramavilasa Sabha, Tenali. A great musician, he was one of the first that migrated to the newly emerging Telugu cinema field.
14. A prestigious production concern in South India started by Nagi Reddy and Chakrapani.
15. Jaganadha Sarma’s dance school was started in 1946 and his father Vedatam Laxmi Narayana Sastry was also teaching there, though sporadically.

VIII

To New places and New challenges : Regional explorations

Introduction

*D*uring the years 1945-50, there was a silent revolution brewing up in Kuchipudi art practices, for during these years several young enthusiasts, who gained enough expertise in the art had to go out seeking their fortunes. The yakshagana, which had by then come to remain the mainstay of Kuchipudi, could not hold more than a dozen trained actors. Bhama kalapam ceased to be a bread-earner because only the ablest among the performers could make any mark. So, the well-trained actors, both in Bhama vesham and in yakshaganam had to seek new avenues for their sustenance. By then, Kuchipudi dance had gained popularity due to the efforts of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and his disciples. Young girls from small and big towns of Andhra craved for dance education. The more enthusiastic the student population in the districts, the more eager were the teachers to migrate to district headquarters or to important towns and cities. Though the trend started by 1939-40, it got consolidated by the 50's.

Vedantam Parvateesam, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Bhagavathula Ramakotaiah, Pasumarthi Seetharamaiah, Bhagavathula Ramatarakam, Chinta Seetharamanjaneyulu, Josyula Seetharamayya and many other able teachers left Kuchipudi after successfully completing their dance education and also their apprenticeship in the Melams and settled down in various parts of the state. While this facilitated their livelihood, such a movement greatly helped to propagate the dance form into the nooks and corners of the state. Many of them were versatile and not with

much work, for there was not enough work in the area of performances. While it opened new vistas for Kuchipudi dance, it also enabled proficient teachers to experiment in the different formats of Kuchipudi, of the past as well as the present. It is, in fact, these creative minds that were mainly responsible for spreading the system of solo dance of Kuchipudi, for the new crop of students could not be trained in full-fledged performances like Bhama kalapam or the yakshaganas and needed shorter versions of Kuchipudi dance. It is unfortunate that this “spatial expanse” of Kuchipudi has not been properly recorded and evaluated. Among the many gurus that operated from several towns, some of them just ended as teachers - studious, committed and inspiring. A few others, thanks to their artistic flexibility and their creative minds - and thanks to the thirst for knowledge shown by the new, non-traditional disciples, have created “local histories” of Kuchipudi art, which, by themselves, are self-satisfying, but in a larger context, more edifying because out of the regional institutions, there came many nationally - recognized performers.

Vedantam Parvateesam

(1920-2005)

A scholar, poet and performer, Vedantam Parvateesam stands apart from the usual crop of the Kuchipudi artists. Born in 1917 to Venkatachalapati and Sowbhagamma, Parvateesam had wider training to groom him to be proficient in several literary and performing arts. He had his dance training from Chinta Venkataramaiah, Vedantam Ramakrishnaiah and Vedantam Raghavaiah. He also learnt



music from Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu. He had regular school education from his brother, Laxminarasimham and practised the art of writing poetry under the guidance of Yeleswaracharyulu. He also studied Hindi and passed his “Rashtra Bhasha” examination early in life.

Parvateesam had his early stint as an actor, having taken up all the *dheerodatta* and *dheera lalitha* roles - as Sri Krishna in *Gaya natakam*, as Aniruddha in *Sasirekha parinayam* and simultaneously acted in female roles such as Chandramati in *Harischandra* and Leelavathi in *Bhakta Prahlada*, with credit. Like many other contemporary actors of Kuchipudi, he also acted in social and mythological plays on the theatrical stage of the mainstream theatre and acquitted himself well. However, his own preferences were *Bhakta Prahlada* as a yakshaganam and the role of Bhamu in Bhamu kalapam and they were, he said, were the best in Kuchipudi repertoire. His bold experimentation in the Kuchipudi format could be seen in his presentation of the Dadinamma *vesham*. He, along with Bhagavatula Laxminarasimham performed Bhamu kalapam at the request of Prof. Vissa Apparao which received great applause both from the learned scholar and the general public.

Parvateesam was one of the first to move out of Kuchipudi in search of self-employment in the area of dance training and started a dance school at Gudivada in as early as 1939. After gaining enough experience as a teacher, performer and choreographer, he came back to Kuchipudi and started a school, “Kuchipudi Kalakshetram” in 1957 and became its principal. It gave an impetus, in later years, for the establishment of Siddhendra Kalakshetram. He also started a dance school at Movva (1976) to impart training in Kshetravya *padams*. Such was Parvateesam’s broad outlook with regard to dance training that went beyond local considerations.

Parvateesam trained scores of students in dance. But his most important contribution lies in his meaningful additions to the already existing texts used in Kuchipudi. His additions to Bhamu kalapam, he felt, were necessitated to fill gaps and also

provide a continuity both in the story line and also in the humorous retorts supplied by Madhavi. His intentions and trials have been duly acknowledged when several Kuchipudi practitioners started using Parvateesam's additions in their productions.

Parvateesam had many 'firsts' to his credit. He was the first to start a school outside Kuchipudi (at Gudivada). He was the first to start a school at Kuchipudi itself and called it Kuchipudi Kalakshestram and was its principal. He was also the first to openly pronounce that some parts of Bhama kalapam and Golla kalapam were missing in the original texts. He was also the first to fill in the gaps in these kalapams.

Parvateesam also rewrote *Rama natakam*, *Golla kalapam* and *Usha Aniruddha natakam*, which, as he believed, correct the lacuna in the original scripts. However, given his circumstances, he could not stage any one of these. But his ideas on the validity of performance texts must be taken into consideration by scholars and future practitioners.

Parvateesam's other writings include *Kuchipudi Melakarthalu*, *Bhagavathula Kuchipudi*, a poetic work on the nature and function of the Bhagavats of the village. His yakshagana writings include *Tripura Samharam*, *Dakshayagnam* and *Arthanareeswaram*. His writings reflect his multi-faceted genius, especially his concern for well - conceived plots.

In later years Parvateesam's major concern used to be to research into the ancient history of Kuchipudi. With the aid of local history and archival records, he proved that the present temple of Bala Tripura Sundari was in fact consecrated in 1923 and several centuries ago the idol of Ramalingeswara was found in the tank nearby and was installed in the temple. A man of wide interests and constant constructive work in the area of Kuchipudi dance, Parvateesam was well respected and was honoured with the title, "Nrithya Vachaspati".

Parvateesam was honoured by several organizations all over the state. He was honoured with the Rashtrapati award in



Parvateesam giving a demonstration lecture on the intricacies of Kuchipudi dance at the All India Kuchipudi Festival conducted by the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi

1953 and was given the central Sangeeta Nataka Akademi award in 1994. A man who believed in hard and systematic work and lived as a model teacher, Parvateesam taught a bunch of youngsters in Vijayawada even when he was eighty. He passed away on November 20, 2005.

After the late Laxminarayana Sastry, it was Parvateesam who gave his students special training in solo items. His book, *Kuchipudi Nritya darpanam* contained many such items. A man well-versed in *sangeeta*, *sahitya* and *nritya* - a rare combination in the present day, Parvateesam had acquitted well in all these areas and it will be difficult for Kuchipudi to find such a well-versed artist for a long time to come.

Among his innumerable students, Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma, Yeleswarapu Nageswara Sarma, Pasumarthi Kesava Prasad and Chinta Rama Murthy stand out in their effort to continue the work of this great savant.

Vedantam Prahlada Sarma (1920-1991)

Born in 1923 to Ramaiah and Subbamma, Prahlada Sarma started learning dance from his father at the age of eight. Later, he continued his education with Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry. He also learnt the art of kalapam from Vempati Venkatanarayana. Having lost his father at a very young age, Prahlada Sarma had to shoulder the family responsibilities and continue his dance studies.



At the age of eleven, he did his first performance in the Ramalingeswara Swamy temple - a very memorable event, according to Prahlada Sarma. On that auspicious day, all the gaints of Kuchipudi dance - Chinta Venkataramaiah, Vempati Venkatanarayana, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and Vedantam Chalapathi - were present and showered their blessings on young Prahlada Sarma.

Sarma's trajectory in the dance field is a perfect example of what many Kuchipudi - born actors would like to follow. He spent fourteen years in training and also donning child roles and the roles of secondary female characters. He was considered to be a very dependable child, having played the roles of Prahlada, Lohitasya, Kusa and young Aniruddha. At a later age he played Chitrarekha in *Usha Parinayam* to Vedantam Raghavaiah's Usha. He then took up major female roles such as Seeta and Sasirekha and as age advanced, he played the queens' roles - Chandramati, Leelavathi and Subhadra creditably.



Prahlada Sarma in a female role

In between these character roles, Prahlada Sarma performed successfully the roles of Satyabhama and Gollabhama also. But more than anything else, he was the only recent actor - dancer who played the *Vesha kathas* - especially the *Balintha* and *Dadinamma*. Much later in life he also took up a male role - that of Devendra in *Ksheera Sagara Mathanam*, a Sangeet

Natak Akademi - sponsored play, with great aplomb. Out of all the characters he had donned, those of Usha and Seetha were recognised as his best and brought him several awards and honours.

Even when he was in his early twenties, Sarma became a much sought-after dancer. He was perhaps the only one who worked with all the four Melams - Chinta, Pasumarthi, Mahankali and Vedantam. This helped Sarma to widen his knowledge and experience and also to overcome his financial difficulties. But all the managers of these Melams were so fully satisfied with his expertise and his co-operation that he was always a welcome dancer - actor. Sarma was devoted to his work and the discipline with which he shaped his disciples he had applied to himself first.

Prahlada Sarma was a great teacher. He groomed his younger brother Satyanarayana Sarma to be a meticulous performer. The younger brother endorsed his brother's strict disciplinary methods and considered him "a perfect guru!". Several



Prahlada Sarma and P.V.G. Krishna Sarma as singers

later-day disciples like Yamini Krishna Murthy and Raja Reddy endorsed the qualities of mind and heart of Prahlada Sarma.

In 1943, Prahlada Sarma performed as Usha in *Usha parinayam* at the Jaipur Congress session in the presence of Mahatma Gandhi and other congress leaders along with a lakh of spectators. Vinoba Bhave, the Gandhian leader, was so impressed by Prahlada Sarma's performance that he invited him to his *ashram* and honoured him.

When Siddhendra Kalakshetram started its first branch at Eluru, Prahlada Sarma was the natural choice as principal. He trained scores of dancers there who have, in later years, become famous. Even here, he showed what a perfect teacher could achieve. He taught his disciples to be imaginative, without deviating from the tradition.

One early development in the training of Kuchipudi dance that Prahlada Sarma had implemented at Eluru was to start summer

camps, which became immensely popular. With the help of Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao and support of C.R.Acharyulu, the scheme was successfully implemented for three years. Gudimetla Krishna, teacher of Korada Narasimha Rao, D.Y.Sampath Kumar, Jayashree and Susheela were among the more well-known dancers that had their training in the summer camps.

At Siddhendra Kalakshetram at Eluru, several now well-known disciples studied under Sarma. Yamini Krishna Murthy, Raja-Radha Reddy, Chandrika, Raja Nandini, Laxmi of Bangalore, Jayashree of Vizag, Manikyala Rao, his own son and Krishna of France were all students of Pahlada Sarma. He toured extensively with his disciples both in India and abroad. With Jyothsna and Lata he toured Algeria, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Tunisia and with Raja-Radha Reddy he toured England, West Germany, Austria and France (1972).

Besides being a reputed teacher, excellent performer and disciplined practitioner of the art, Pahlada Sarma, ever since he took up the principal's job, was extremely interested in evolving a basic and systematic grammar for Kuchipudi. A step in that direction was his book *Kuchipudi Nritya Manjari* (1991). He continued the work while he was invited to work as a Visting Professor at Hyderabad Central University and Telugu University and recorded the basic *adugu* system practised by the Kuchipudi gurus.

Pahlada Sarma received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1985) and also the President of India's award (1985). He continued his work in recording the basic structural patterns of Kuchipudi dance technique and related the practising techniques of Kuchipudi with those of Natya Sastra.

Even before he completed the work, he passed away at Eluru in 1991.

Bhaghavatula Ramakotaiah (1924-1980)

Bhagatula Ramakotaiah, son of Kutumba Sastry, was a true teacher with exceptional zeal and a sense of purpose. He was also a stickler to the tradition. Amiable and friendly with his disciples, he was equally known as a disciplinarian of a rare breed. An imposing figure, he commanded respect and demanded attention. Ramakotaiah was the architect of Kuchipudi training in Hyderabad, the state capital of Andhra Pradesh. He was the earliest to have started imparting training in Kuchipudi in the Telangana area. As he was a popular man and an outspoken speaker, he had gained as many friends as foes.



Bhagavathula Ramakotaiah had his strong grounding in Kuchipudi when he studied under Chinta Venkataramaiah, whom he revered as an extraordinary guru all through his life and as his patriarch. A true adherent to traditional value systems, he was not averse to introducing refining modes, within the format of the age-old system. He learnt from Guru Chinta Venkataramaiah not only the nuances in the kalapams, but was particularly incensed with his yakshagana training methodology. He was equally proficient in the arts of dance and dance-music ; the first one he learnt from Chinta and later from Vedantam Raghavaiah, whose sister, Ramalaxmi he married. He also had a short stint of discipleship under Bhagavathula Vissayya, especially in the Dadinamma Vesham. He had his training in music under Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu.



Ramakotaiah as Golla bhama in
Golla kalapam

Ramakotaiah started performing child roles as any boy initiated into dance in Kuchipudi used to do. Since his learning was so quick and what he learnt he mastered soon, he was given “interlude” dances during an all-night performance of yakshaganas which was considered a great honour and recognition of talents. He soon started taking up major roles, especially the female lead roles. His

particular *forte* was Golla kalapam, though he did Bhama kalapam with equal fervour. He was one of the few in Kuchipudi who could perform both the kalapams with facility. He received encomiums for his roles of Urvashi and Mohini in which *sattvika* and *angika* vie with each other.

Ramakotaiah was the first Kuchipudi youngster to have thought of having an institute in Kuchipudi village wholly devoted to teaching the dance art and propagating it. This was in 1951. He sought the help of several luminaries in and around Kuchipudi. Everyone promised help, but none came forward. In two years during which time he tried to earn money and support for his new dream - the school - and failed, the project was wound up. Ramakotaiah did not lose heart. He was continuing his performances. During this time, his constant companion was Vedantam Sambaiah, a Kuchipudi violinist, who believed in the capabilities of his friend. Sambaiah, a genial man, came to Hyderabad with Ramakotaiah and stayed there helping his friend in the yakshagana productions.

In 1942, Ramakotaiah was invited to choreograph a modern dance drama for the Praja Natya Mandali, the cultural outfit of the Communist Party of India. He directed “Simla Bhagavatham¹” for the group. The performances, given all through the years 1942 and 1943 were a roaring success. The dance drama was taken to all the major cities in India. Ramakotaiah led a team of 14 youngsters, many of them from Kuchipudi. Darbha Venkateswarlu, who later became an active member of the Venkatarama Natya Mandali, P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma, Vedantam Chalapati and Mahankali Venkaiah - all notable laterday Kuchipudi performers were members of the team. Though the association was called ‘Abhyudaya Praja Natya Kala Mandali’, the then British government banned the organization and the play. Many actor-dancers were arrested. Ramakotaiah himself was arrested in Nagpur and was jailed for 3 months.

Though the entire episode was a short - lived one, it left a lasting influence on Ramakotaiah. He always believed that art, in order to reach the common people, should be sincere in its purpose and the artist should be sincere to his art and to himself.

In 1955 came a golden opportunity when he was invited by Shanti Dev Ghosh to give a performance of Bhama kalapam at Shanti Niketan. The performance was a roaring success and Kuchipudi was introduced for the first time in the then culturally dominant state of Bengal. During this sojourn, he befriended a Shanti Niketan student from Andhra - Narra Venkataratnam who later helped him start the ‘Kuchipudi Nritya Nilayam’ at Hyderabad in 1955, the very first institute to teach Kuchipudi in the state capital . The school was a moderate success financially but had gained strength in adhering to the traditional tenets of training. An untiring and genial guru that he was, Ramakotaiah soon made his institute a centre for bold experiments and daringly new choreographies. He enlisted the support of the A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi, which recognized his work as a teacher and gave affiliation to the institute as a “Gurukulam”, assisting and supporting it financially.

Besides “Simla Bhagavatham”, Ramakotaiah’s creativity in modern dance-dramas would be evident in ballets like Gurazada’s “Lavana Raju Katha” and “Padmaragam” a modern romantic tale. The two ballets are unlike each other and his productions of these two with amateurs were bold and sensitive.

It is while teaching in this Gurukulam that Ramakotaiah had fulfilled all his dreams of teaching Kuchipudi on the traditional methods. He was available always to his students. His house became the learners’ second home. Students loved him and feared him. Here, he started teaching not only Bhama kalapam, but also *padams*, *ashtapadis* and *javalis*, studiously making his students write down the literal meaning of each line and its performance modules. It is also here that Ramakotaiah taught all the important yakshaganas to his *sishtyas*, who were all in the age group of ten to twenty and worked so hard with them that the kids equalled any professional actor.

Ramakotaiah’s subtle interpretations of the yakshagana characters reminded one of his guru Chinta Venkataramaiah. He groomed the youngsters to take up the difficult roles of the *rakshasas* and gave them support and encouragement. He did *Prahlada* for the first time, outside the Kuchipudi native ground, along with *Sasirekha Parinayam*, *Usha Parinayam* and *Rama Natakam*. His participation as Sutradhara in Bhama kalapam was a treat for he deviated from the crude and wornout jokes of the traditional format and introduced his own teasingly fresh dialogues in the tantalizing scene of Satyabhama - Sutradhara encounter. He gave the *uddhata* roles to senior girl students who acquitted themselves extremely well, in these roles. His way of training the youngsters gave ample dividends.

Besides being an able performer and commanding leader, Ramakotaiah was also passionate about writing on the Kuchipudi art and artists. His essays published in *Natyakala*, brought out by the A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi on Chinta Venkataramaiah and Chinta Krishna Murthy and on the Pagativeshalu are of great quality².

Ramakotaiah's sudden demise (1980) at an early age was surely a setback to the serious study and dissemination of Kuchipudi art in the State, and especially the State capital.

Pasumarthi Seetharamaiah (b. 1923)



Born in 1923 to Subrahmanya Sastry and Arundhatamma at Kuchipudi, Seetharamaiah started his traditional dance education at the tender age of five with guru Chinta Venkataramaiah. He was under the tutelage of Chinta Krishna Murthy and Chinta Audinarayana and still later under Vedantam Raghavaiah. He learnt music from Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu and Marthi Seetharamaiah, a popular music director in the contemporary musical theatre. He also became adept in playing harmonium like his two music gurus. In this capacity as a harmonist and music accompanist he served his parent organization, Venkatarama Natya Mandali for several years.

Seetharamaiah, like any other growing child in Kuchipudi, took up child roles in his younger days followed by female roles. He did the roles of Seetha in *Rama Natakam* and Sasirekha in *Sasirekha Parinayam* with credit. Even at a very young age Seetharamaiah specialized in *Sattvikabhinaya* and was adjudged the best competitor in the Kshetrayy Padaabhinaya competitions at Movva continuously for three years - in 1967, 68 and 69 - a rare feat.

Seetharamaiah established Sri Venkataramana Kuchipudi Nrithya Niketan at Visakhapatnam in 1966 and started training

students. When the Andhra University started its school of arts at Visakhapatnam, he joined the department in 1974. Soon he became known in the northern coastal districts of Andhra as a devoted teacher. Dancers, who, in later years, became celebrated artists like Swapna Sundari and Sonal Mansingh were his students.

Pasumarthi proved to be proficient in producing the traditional yakshaganas like *Bhakta Prahlada* and *Usha Parinayam* in a condensed form. He also choreographed new dance dramas such as *Gopika Krishna*, *Girija kalyanam* and *Parijathapaharanam*. However, he had a special aptitude for choreographing *padams* and *javalis* for he firmly believed that they would truly bring out the best in a learner.

Seetharamaiah was always fond of presenting new choreographies. He choreographed several solos for his disciples. He was one of the first to set Annamacharya's keertans to dance. Credit should also go to him for having incorporated sombre *jati* - patterns even in *sringara*-oriented Kshetrappa *padams*. His "ghata nrityam" was of special attraction. Dancers would dance on new clay pots to *jatis* in varying *kaalams*. Wherever he presented this dance, it used to be the highlight of the programme.

Seetharamaiah's method of teaching was very traditional. Like his guru Chinta Venkataramaiah, he would always stress on the basics and when it came to more complex movements, he would insist that the disciples would repeat them several times, uttering the *jatis* themselves. Similarly he would also insist that the Natya Sastra slokas should be memorised and reproduced with their meaning.

Simple and humble, yet creative and undaunted, Pasumarthi Seetharamaiah succeeded in moulding Visakhapatnam a productive centre of excellence for Kuchipudi dance.

Yeleswarapu Nageswara Sarma (1938-2012)

Born at Kuchipudi on July 15, 1938 to Venkateswarlu and Seshachalamma, Nageswara Sarma had his initial training in dance since his seventh year. He learnt abhinaya from Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and music from Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjanyulu. He also had training from Vedantam Parvateesam and P.V.G.Krishna Sarma. He held diplomas both in Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam.



Nageswara Sarma started his career as a Kuchipudi teacher in several schools in Krishna district. He worked as a teacher of Kuchipudi dance at Jawahar Bal Bhavan, Chilakalapudi, Machilipatnam for fifteen years. As a teacher Sarma was very popular in the district and taught several distinguished students.

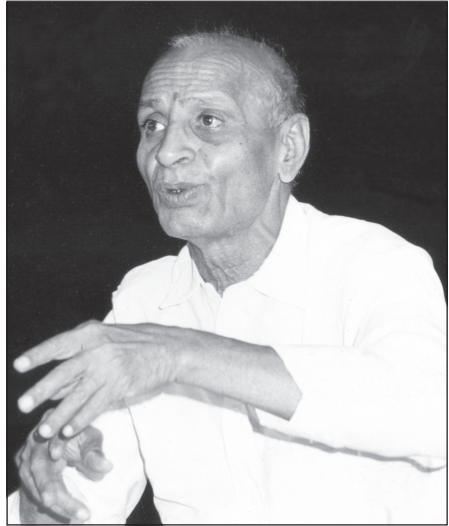
Sarma was known for his inimitable style of abhinaya - especially of *mukhjabhinaya* and *hastabhinaya*, the two presentational formats he learnt from his great guru, Sri Laxminarayana Sastry. His sudden and quick changes of hand gestures themselves were dramatic and invoked instantaneous applause from spectators.

Sarma choreographed several yakshaganas such as 'Menaka Viswamitra', 'Sakuntala Dushyanta', 'Sita Rama Kalyanam', all of them having been telecast over Doordarshan. Among the many honours he received, the central Sangeet Natak Akademi's award for Kuchipudi was one.

Sarma passed away at Kuchipudi in 2012.

Josyula Seetharama Sastry (1933-2004)

Josyula Seetharama Sastry, who was for sometime a teacher of Kuchipudi dance at the Government Music and Dance College, Vijayawada, was an eminent guru. He had his basic training in yakshagana from Tadepalli Perayya Sastry and joined Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry to learn Bhama kalapam and solo items. He had the distinction of accompanying his guru, Sri



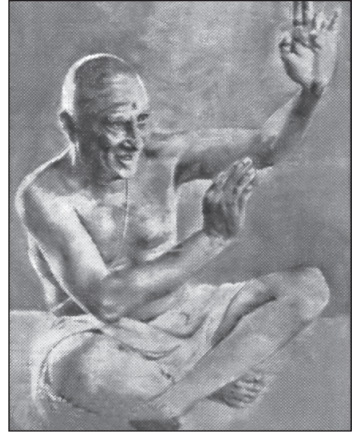
Vedantam to several places all over Andhra. He was the Asthana Vidwan of Kanakadurga temple at Vijayawada. He was a recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi award. He passed away in 2004.

Other Important Teachers

Almost every Kuchipudi artist has been a teacher. Many taught dance to their children initially, though sent them to one or the other famous teachers later. Some teachers found important teaching assignments in cities and towns. Some teachers, residing at Kuchipudi, taught the devadasis of Nangigadda and Ghantasala and accompanied them for *mejuvanis* and *kucheri-s*.

Several Kuchipudi maestros like Chinta Venkataramaiah and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry taught the devadasis. Among later-day teachers who specialized in teaching the devadasis and conducting their performances were Bhagavathula Vissayya and Tadepalli Perayya Sastry.

Bhagavathula Vissayya (1880 - 1959), son of “Balintha” Ramaiah was known for his performances as Bhama in his younger days and the *Vesha kathas* of “Dadinamma” and “Balintha” in later years. He spent most of his time in training devadasis of Ghantasala and Nangigadda. His prominent disciple in Kuchipudi was Bhagavathula Ramakotaiah. Krishna Veni of Nangigadda and Bala Tripura Sundari of Repalle were his important devadasi disciples.



Tadepalli Perayya Sastry (1866 - 1942) born to Gauramma and Subbarayudu, became famous as a teacher of the devadasis, teaching them Bhama kalapam and Golla kalapam. He was also engaged as a “Sutradhara” for their performances. Within the village, his illustrious disciples were Vempati Chinna Satyam and Josyula Seetharama Sastry.

Some noteworthy teachers who settled down in mofisil towns and did or still doing good work are huge in number. However, mention must be made of Chinta Seetharamanjanyulu (Gudivada), Bhagavathula Ramatarakam (Kavali), Hemadri Chidambara Deekshitilu (Kovvur), Chinta Audinarayana (Guntur) and Mahankali Srimannarayana (Bapatla). Their individual work, though limited to



Bhagavathula
Yagnanarayana Sarma

the region in which they are working, is all the more important because they infused an unsatiated desire in scores of their students to learn Kuchipudi. Bhagavatula Yagnanarayana (Vijayawada) choreographed several mythological yakshaganas in the traditional mould. He was given the prestigious Tagore Akademi Award in 2012.

Besides, teachers in other institutions also have done noteworthy work. Bhagavathula Seetharama Sarma (Kalakshetra, Chennai), Mahankali Mohan (Kuchipudi Kalakshetra, Hyderabad) and Vedantam Ramu (Kuchipudi Kalakshetra, Chennai) have done commendable work in training the students and doing Nattuvangam for the performances of these institutions.

Venkata Rama Natya Mandali, though primarily a performing repertory, hosted several functionaries when they took up training for new plays. Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry, Bhagavathula Satya Sundara Rama Sastry, Mahankali Subba Rao, Mahankali Sriramulu, Josyula Krishna Murthy and Vedantam Veeraraghavaiah have done their might to keep Kuchipudi flag afloat.

The Siddhendra Kalakshetram has been a major institute imparting training and its principals and teachers have been engaged in teaching, training and production. Chinta Krishna Murthy, P.V.G.Krishna Sarma, Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma and Chinta Ramanadham of the old crop and the present incumbents like Vedantam Radheshyam and Ramalinga Sastry have been doing exceedingly good work to sustain interest in Kuchipudi dance. Radheshyam is an enthusiastic and devoted teacher whose ably-handled nattuvangam is often overshadowed by his orchestral



Radheshyam as sutradhara

abhinaya. He is thoroughly groomed in the tradition and is a well respected teacher.

The other institutions and university departments in the state are also doing their best within the limited scope they have beyond imparting training. The Hyderabad Central University, with a contingent of able and research-oriented teachers such as Anuradha Jonnalagadda, Pasumarthi Ramalinga Sastry, Aruna Bhikshu and Jayaraj has been engaged in teaching and active research work. Provision for the visits of eminent scholars and gurus for seminars and lec-dems is its strongest claim for serious research work in the area of Kuchipudi studies. The Telugu University gives greater emphasis on giving practical training. With Uma Ramarao earlier and Alekhya, Bhagavatula Sethuram and other enthusiastic teachers now, the Department of Dance at Telugu University has to prepare itself to play a leading role since the Siddhendra Kalakshetram at Kuchipudi works under its aegis.

Among the Gurus stationed at Kuchipudi mention must be made of Pasumarthi Kesava Prasad, who had his training under Vedantam Parvateesam and later from P.V.G. Krishna Sarma and Vempati Chinna Satyam, sustains a strong will to keep the Kuchipudi flag flying. He also helps scholars with sources and information regarding the dance traditions of Kuchipudi. Under the banner of 'Akhila Bharata Kuchipudi Natyakala Mandali' his festivals are slowly gaining to be an annual All India feature - a real praiseworthy effort.

Teaching institutions outside Andhra have been doing commendable work. They are teaching and performing institutions. Raja - Radha Reddy's institutions both at Delhi and now at Hyderabad not only train students in Kuchipudi, but also produce imaginative dance ballets. Raja Reddy is one of our finest choreographers and imaginative creative artists. Jayarama Rao and Vanashri Rao, the dancing duo have established themselves as important performers and choreographers. Swapna Sundari, after a long and successful spell as a Kuchipudi dancer and choreographer, is now keen on introducing the lasya traditions of

the devadasi dancers, which she calls “Vilasini Nrityam” and groomed quite a number of young dancers. The Kuchipudi Kalakendra at Mumbai and Kuchipudi Art Academy at Chennai are doing yeoman service and are the custodians of dance training in these major cities. Kuchipudi Art Academy until recently gained international fame under the able leadership of Guru Chinna Satyam and is now striving to retain its fame. It has a special place in the history of the Kuchipudi dance and well-wishers hope it keeps its eminence in tact.

Several dancers have established schools in USA, UK, France and other major western countries and are instrumental in inculcating interest among youngsters. Major among them include Ratna Kumar, Anuradha Nehru, Sasikala Penumarthi and others.

The work of scores of teachers is very encouraging. If the efforts of these institutions and teachers are focussed towards improving the quality of teaching, research and performances, one can look forward for a hopeful future for Kuchipudi.

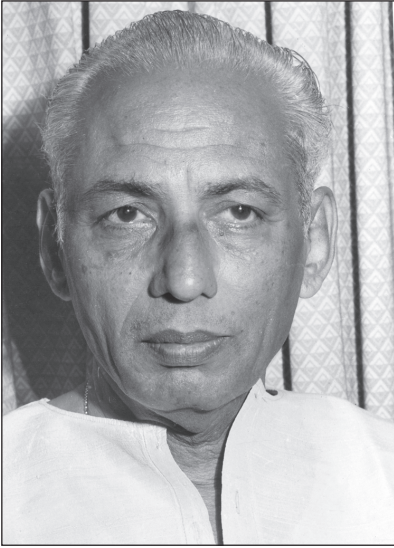
The non-Kuchipudi born artists and Gurus need an extensive coverage of their work. Assessment of their work will be undertaken in a companion volume later.

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IX

Vempati Chinna Satyam (1929-2012) : Tradition, Innovation and Modernity



Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam is Kuchipudi's gift to the world of Indian Dance. Like the other pioneers of this era and the earlier - Rukmini Devi, Kelucharan Mohapatra and Birju Maharaj, to name a few - he too worked within the parameters of his chosen art form, and like them, enlarged the creative fecundity by elevating the art form to nobler heights, by giving it a pan-Indian expanse. Vempati brought to Kuchipudi a classical insignia

and a global ambience¹ while retaining his art's roots down to the traditional soil of Kuchipudi.

It is interesting to note that Vempati, the in-sider, has worked hard for the last fifty years to refurbish the form and format of Kuchipudi. It looks all the more astonishing because some of the other pioneers of the Renaissance era of Indian dance do not come from families whose hereditary profession was dance. Rukmini Devi's socio-cultural milieu and Kelu Babu's multi-channelled theatrical exposures guided them into the field of dance since it signified for them what was best in the tradition. But to be born in a family which followed the tradition for 150 years, to look at his own family profession objectively, sit on judgement of

the artistic excellence of one's own elders and bring about a revolution - is a stupendous task! Vempati Chinna Satyam (and to some extent, Birju Maharaj) had just done this - regenerating an art form from within!

The trajectory of Vempati's artistic journey was long and fortuitous. With phenomenal zeal, unswerving determination and artistic integrity, he embarked on a difficult journey, overcoming early debacles to reach the pinnacle of artistic excellence. Behind this unique achievement lies a man, humble yet steadfast; knowledgeable and yet ever-learning; rooted in his own soil, but always on flights of new creative imagination. The journey of Vempati and his Kuchipudi art seem to be typically identical: both started like a stream in a tiny spot, strided past hills and valleys and remained ever-expanding, always bubbling with a brimming joy of freshness and vigour.

Born into a modest, yet artistic, family of performers in Kuchipudi village, on October 15, 1929, Vempati had dance in his veins and genes, so to say. A ninth generation practitioner, he had learnt his alphabets in music and dance from Tadepalli Perayya Sastry and Pasumarthi Kondalarayudu. He then came under the tutelage of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, that legendary Guru and illustrious progenitor of present-day Kuchipudi, whose refreshingly original and daringly creative experiments resulted in building a large repertoire for Kuchipudi, teaching boys and girls from non-traditional families and, above all, initiating a solo-system in Kuchipudi dance². No other disciple of Laxminarayana Sastry imbibed his originality of approach and experimental bent of mind as Chinna Satyam did.

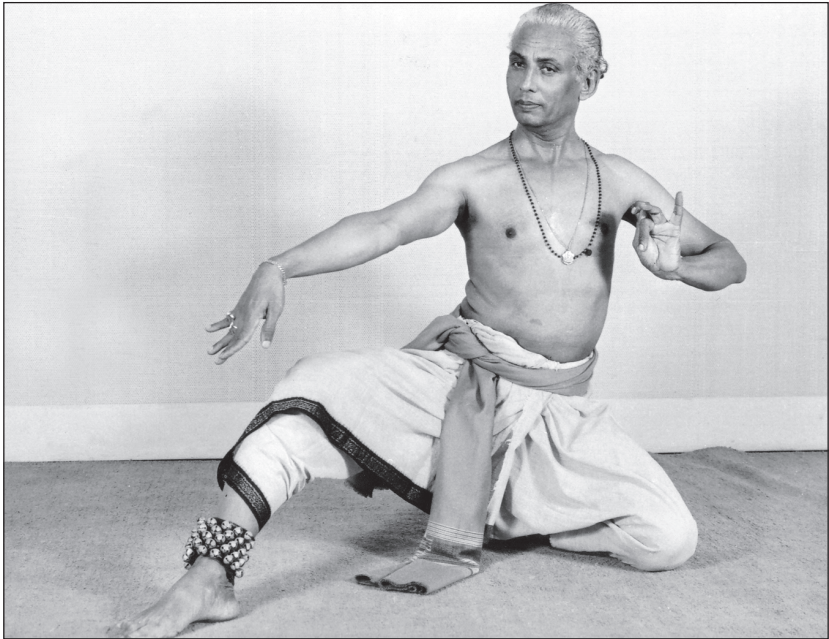
However, the confines of a small village bothered Vempati both financially and artistically. He ventured to move out. With a cousin, Vempati Peda Satyam, in the movies at Madras, he thought he could easily eke out his livelihood and find an opening for his creative urge. With a short stint in commercial cinema³, where established mediocrity was patronized in preference to abounding originality, Vempati came out and started giving private tuitions.

Then came a hopeful opening with Shanta Rao backing him to start a school⁴. The charming danseuse gave all help but proved to be excessively possessive. Vempati, becoming wiser with experience, ventured into starting his own school at this crucial juncture. The Kuchipudi Art Academy⁵, started in 1963, has since become a Mecca for all aspirants who wanted to learn Kuchipudi. As A. S. Raman, well-respected editor of *The Illustrated Weekly of India* said as early as in 1973⁶:

“Today, (Kuchipudi) is the word that best sums up the work of just two dedicated men. It is almost synonymous with them. Both bear the same name: Satyam. One is a performer, Vedantam Satyam⁷. The other is a preceptor, Vempati Satyam... Nine out of ten celebrated danseuses must have learnt the Kuchipudi style at his feet at one time or another and the tenth is bound to go to him sooner or later, because no other Guru can supply what is missing in her dance: that elusive 'elan', that flamboyant fluidity which enables her style to come to life.

Other teachers may be more knowledgeable, more competent and more imaginative than he. But he has in abundance something indefinable and they seem to lack it, something which is a blend of learning, sensibility, creativity and expressiveness. He succeeds professionally where others fail because of his charisma as a teacher.

Groomed as he was on the traditions of kalapam and yakshaganam, he soon learnt to distinguish between what was strong in, and so can be borrowed from, the tradition and what more was needed to make Kuchipudi a viable, living form. Capturing the innovative methods of his Guru, Laxminarayana Sastry, the attractive and graceful, though cinematic, choreographies of his cousin, Peda Satyam and the fluency of



Strongly rooted in the tradition, Chinna Satyam brought in innovative methods in *angika* and *sattvika*

expression of such eminent dancers as Kamala (Laxman), Vempati's intuitive genius ventured into making Kuchipudi a sastric form of classical elegance, yet retaining the romantic fervour and theatrical sensibility of his native form, thereby infusing a new grace and vigour, a delicacy of expression and the expanse of body language.

Vempati made new strides in realizing his vision with the growing popularity of his Academy. He taught about a thousand students in the last forty years of his life ; many of them, settled either in India or abroad, became, in their own right, knowledgeable teachers and proud propagators of Kuchipudi⁸. He moved on from success to yet another success, with that easy transcendence of a born genius. But, in this his long and strenuous journey he had to encounter several hurdles, both personal and artistic. He never cared, of course, for personal gains and losses, when once the artistic endeavours bore fruit. During these long years of

consolidation, Vempati has choreographed at least two hundred new solo items and more than a dozen scintillating dance dramas, which bear ample testimony to his quantitative as well as qualitative creative output.

Vempati's innovations in solo items as well as in dance dramas are too many to mention in passing; but one can venture to find, by tracing some of these, the working of a master choreographer, craftsman and regisseur⁹. According to Vempati, the solos occupy an important place in a dance form's repertoire: "... for the spread of (the) tradition, a strong solo repertoire is a prerequisite¹⁰". Solos are individual items, taught and learnt separately. They are taught to a single dancer (it may be more) at the convenience of both the teacher and the taught. As in a group item the choreographer need not concentrate on composition, balance and symmetry. However, as the solo items are important instruments of the profession, and are crucial in a dancer's artistic endeavour, utmost care is to be taken in presentation. Further, if a programme contains six dance numbers, each one must show variety in rhythm, in sahitya, in pace and must be a perfect amalgam of content and technique. For this, the choreographer must search for 'new' treasures or re-do old numbers with a stamp of his own.

The solo numbers Vempati choreographed belonged to both these types: a large number of new pieces find a pride of place in Vempati's repertoire. *Ashtapadis, tarangams, padams* and *keertans* by eminent *vaggeyakaras* hitherto untouched were newly choreographed by Vempati for the first time. The other type of solo numbers consists of those that are re-choreographed by Vempati, taken from the traditional repertoire. These include items done traditionally as a part of a play, but stand on their own due to their generalized content.

Vempati showed exemplary craftsmanship and imagination in both the newly choreographed and re-choreographed numbers. They contain characteristics that would serve as text book theories. The foremost among them is that Vempati looked at each piece as a "*drisya khanda-kavya*"¹¹ - a short dramatic piece intended for



Vempati and Yamini Krishnamurthy in
Ksheerasagamadhanam

visual presentation. In such a sense each song is treated as a separate entity by itself and is treated as an independent dramatic piece which has a beginning, a middle and an end. The introductory part is expository, introducing the subject, the characters involved and the mood. It takes off somewhere at the beginning of the second stanza of the song and picks up its pace and moves on to a climactic point and finishes with a

summing up of the entire episode's major thrust in the final repetition of the *pallavi*, winding up the song.

Vempati has said that he had consciously created a structure for each of the categories of solo numbers. He particularly mentioned about his "*tarangam* structure".¹² The same performance structure was followed by his disciples. Some of the traditional gurus also copied it, though they did not acknowledge. In this connection, one would remember such an attempt by his Guru, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, for *padams*. He not only created a structure but also wrote it down in black and white. Sastry garu called it a "performance manual, Jaatakam".¹³ It is, in a way, a teacher's manual for a *padam* performance and had showed the way for Vempati to provide authentic structural formulations for all the categories normally used in a Kuchipudi recital.

Vempati said that he structured these pieces for a "solo stage". The word has a new spatial meaning with an altogether new perspective. It is not merely a stage set for a solo dancer; along with it came the lighting design which would place the dancer in perspective. It also includes the area to be covered by the dancer during the number. A lot of dramatic activity is to be created for the dancer to interpret the lines in the prescribed emotional spectrum. In order to achieve this, Vempati has invented some performative techniques and the result is exceedingly pleasing.

The first important thing that is discernible, both in the solo pieces as well as dance dramas, is the way he worked out the entrances and exits.¹⁴ Each entry and exit are carefully organized to give a dramatic start and an equally dramatic finish. Within these parameters, each solo item is choreographed with a growing tempo in mind. The *jatis* are so carefully jettisoned that they stand as both emotional pieces (to carry on the emotion of the lines of the text) and also as narrative connectors between one *charanam* and the other, thereby making each solo piece an entity by itself. Even the entry of a particular dancer in a given solo piece is prescribed; the dancer must enter the stage "on a given *gati*, in three speeds - the *vilamba*, the *madhyama* and the *dhrita* talas". This not only enables the dancer to establish his or her mastery over the rhythm, but also explains the nature of the character or mood of the item *per se*.

The second innovation is to create a "speaker" or a "character" through whose perspective the action of the whole song emerges. This creation of a *dramatis personae* through whom the song is enacted is a risky innovation. So, many choreographers usually set the piece as an interpretation of the *sahitya* and nothing else. This practice is abandoned in Vempati's choreography, and very often, in its place, in the place of a neutral narrator, a character with a motivation is introduced i.e. a need for the action "to occur". Thus each piece is evaluated on the basis of the "given circumstances" from which the song would have erupted. Tyagaraja's "ksheerasagara sayana" is a wonderful example of what

a choreographer's imaginative capabilities can offer an entirely fascinating interpretation! Vempati showed that Thyagaraja himself was singing the song in ecstasy after he found the Lord's idols in the river, thus adding a *dhwani*, a suggestion to the words "ksheerasagara sayana", indicating that He (God) has been resting on the Milky Ocean, while he (Tyagaraja) was searching for him¹⁵." Such examples abound and need larger space and a different occasion to explore. Enough to say that all the major *Vaggeyakaras* - Annamacharya, Uttukadu Venkata Subba Iyer, Dikshitar, Shyama Sastry, Tyagaraja, Kshetrayya - all of them found their major presence in Vempati's repertoire.

Another purposeful deviation from the tradition consciously and continuously practised by Vempati is the stress on and importance given to elaborate technical aspects of *angika* relegating the *vachika* to the orchestral singers¹⁶. The traditional practice insists that each character should speak its lines. Vempati's is a total reversal from this traditional practice. Looking at the completely changed scenario of the Kuchipudi dance, this elimination of character lines is but apt and inevitable. When a regional form is elevated into a cosmopolitan one, practised by



Vempati's innovation of orchestral elegance : (from left to right)
S R Govindarajan, Muralikrishna, Vempati, Sangita Rao, Bala Kondal Rao

dancers irrespective of the religion, caste, creed and language, the spoken text by a dancer becomes burdensome. So Vempati relegated the speaking and singing parts to the orchestra and the dancing part to the performer. This way he could ensure the correct diction and meaningful intonation of the text and also avoid the embarrassment (both to the dancer and the audience) of a non-Telugu character speaking atrocious Telugu! In dance-dramas, he invariably eliminated the prose dialogue, but on rare occasions the dialogue is rendered by the singer in the orchestra. This gave the sahitya a new dimension: it is clear and appropriate. The lyrics of the past masters of song have come to life with clear and emotionally - tinged voices of the singers.

Vempati made extensive use of the several technical movement-patterns in his song sequences and dance dramas. As Kuchipudi is deeply rooted in the Natya Sastra tradition, he went again and again to the grammar of Natya Sastra and improved his grasp of the art theoretically and also in translating it into performance.

As he says, "consequently, I included the technical aspect of *angikabhinaya* such as the *Nritta hastas*, *charis* and others in both the pure dance and *Nritya* sequences." He also quotes an example from his own choreographed work, the "Pravesa Daruvu" of *Usha Parinayam*, done as a solo number: "When I re-choreographed it as a solo number, I used *Bhaumi Charis* like *Vichyava*, *Syandita*, *Urudvritta*, *Apasyandita*, *Mattalli* and *Akasiki charis* such as *Vidyubhranta* and the like. In the process, a variety is also brought into the *Nritta* and *Nritya* technique of Kuchipudi."¹⁷ He also followed his great guru's quick - silver hand gestures and used as many *sancharis* as possible to highlight the interpretations possible in great texts.

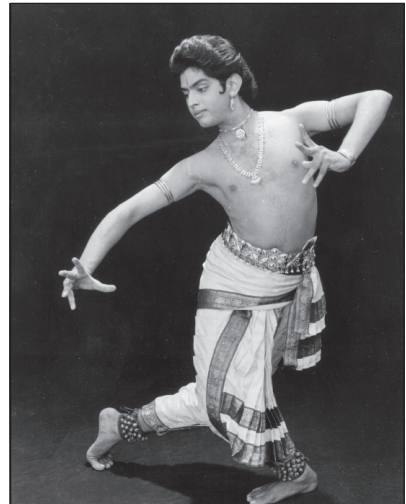
A word about the re-choreographed solo numbers. In fact these are the ones that are popular in traditional yakshaganas and kalapams. Some of them were earlier choreographed by his own Guru, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry. They serve, in fact, as a

link between tradition and modernity. Since in the traditional practice these were performed as parts of a major Yakshagana, they needed a separate performative treatment when shown as solo pieces. He was also conscious that these pieces served as *raison d'tre* of his choreographic abilities, and would have to stand the scrutiny of the traditional gurus. Vempati stood unhampered. The "letter sequence" in Bhamakalapam holds good as a perfect example of Vempati's attitude to "*dancic* visualization". Earlier, the 'lekha' (letter) was rendered by the performer, sitting at one place and simulating writing a letter with a few 'mudras' used occasionally. Vempati was against this "static" position of Satyabhama for almost 12 minutes. He made his Bhama stand up, move about, use *caris* and *mudras* to comment upon the action. Some of the predominant changes in *angika* rendering in the dance dramas throw light on Vempati's attitude to abhinaya more elaborately¹⁸. Vempati will be remembered for his illuminating versions of choreographed numbers. He is solely responsible for consolidating the solo system in Kuchipudi.

Vempati choreographed about fifteen dance dramas, starting with *Srikrishna parijatham* (1959). It was followed, in regular intervals, by *Chandalika* (1961) *Ksheerasagara mathanam*



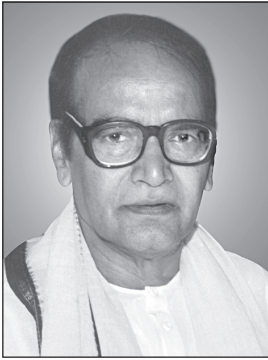
a scene from *Haravilasam*



Vempati Ravi Shankar

(1962), *Vipranarayana charitra* (1969), *Menaka Viswamitram* (1971), *Kalyana Sakuntalam* (1971), *Padmavathi Srinivasa Kalyanam* (1975), *Kalyana Rukmini* (1984), *Haravilasam* (1988), *Ramayanam* (1991), *Siva dhanurbhangam* (1992), *Arthanareeswaram* (1998), *Sri Pada parijatham* (2000), *Kiratarjuneeyam* and *Gopika Krishna* (2004). These dance dramas occupy a coveted place in Vempati Chinna Satyam's entire creative output.

These dance dramas are the combined work of three luminaries. Vempati is the leader of this group as the choreographer, S.V. Bhujangaraya Sarma, Head of the Dept. of Telugu at Jawahar



Bhujangaraya Sarma



Chinna Satyam



Sangeeta Rao

Bharati, Kavali (Nellore district) as the writer and P.Sangeeta Rao, a veena expert who is associated with music composition. The coming together of these three ushered in a golden age in Kuchipudi dance history. Sarma was the author of the majority of Vempati's dance dramas and Sangeeta Rao set the musical score to most of the plays except the earlier ones. Vempati himself was very ardently touchy about their relationship. Writing about the preliminary preparations for rehearsing *Padmavati Srinivasa Kalyanam*, Vempati said :¹⁹

Right from the moment we conceived the theme, myself, Bhujangaraya Sarma (the script writer) and Sangeeta Rao (music director, even though initially Bhavanaryana Rao was associated with music

compositions) were constantly discussing and each time modifying and composing either the script or music, to suit to the needs of the performance. Perhaps it could be said that they gave shape to my imagination in terms of using a word at some point or making a note at the other. Such perfect rapport we had with each other that this team work is the major cause that make my productions what they are.

In fact, Vempati has been fed on the intricacies of *Natya*, the dramatic mode, since he was four. The '*Natya Mela*' tradition and the 'dramatic' mode in the Kuchipudi tradition had always been its high watermark of achievement. Vempati has a natural instinct for the 'dramatic' and even in the solo items he choreographed, he gave special attention to '*angika*' and '*sattvika*'. The predominance of physical action (through *charis* and *mudras*, through *gati bhedas* in stage walk) could be seen even in shorter pieces. The same practice proved more successful in dance - dramas for, as Vempati visualized, characters can be distinguished through *angika*. This is more important in the absence of '*vachika*' for the characters, though it comes from the vocalists.

The second important deviation Vempati brought about in his dance dramas is complete elimination of the characters speaking the dialogue directly. The dialogue and the narration, instead, are given to the vocalists. The traditional yakshagana, from which sprang the present day dance drama, was full of *vachika*. In fact, several classical dance forms are text-specific. Within the parameters prescribed by the text, the choreographer and the dancer might instill variety and bring about some variations. But in Vempati's dance dramas character dialogue, either in prose or song, is relegated to the singers. This change is emphasized by Sangeeta Rao, the music director : "His works of dance drama project the characteristics of Western Opera and ballet... He has relied heavily on *Natya Dharmi* than on *Lok Dharmi* and has avoided such rustic indulgences as dialogues..."²⁰ At the outset, this appears to be a

great handicap. In fact, earlier critics found this unacceptable, for the strength of Kuchipudi lay in the rendering of the dialogue by the character itself. But Vempati felt it more a hindrance than an advantage. As he is working in a cosmopolitan milieu, many of his dancers are non-Telugu ones. And more often than not, they are all women taking up the roles of men. Their speaking out the dialogues of a male character which they are donning would look inappropriate.

The solution found by Vempati was perfectly in tune with the needs of the hour. This is also a practice in several other dance dramas found elsewhere in India.

The third prominent deviation found in Vempati's dance dramas is that they are dominated by female performers. Sometimes they are all-female presentations. From an all-male tradition to an all-female one seems, at first, a dichotomy, brought into the transition of the tradition. But Vempati proved right again for, instead of relying upon unwilling and undependable male actors, to have most dependable and more than willing female participants would vouchsafe the success of the project. No less a dance observer and critic than Subbudu lauded this particular, changed phenomenon of Vempati's choreographic perception²¹ :

I know how difficult it is for creative artists to effect improvements in art forms, without, of course, destroying the basic tenets. It is but proper that Kuchipudi must also undergo a sea-change. It is, therefore, to the credit of Vempati that he has heralded a new era by choreographing a Kuchipudi dance drama with women participants. Its innate charm can be appreciated only as a ballet.

Another significant change that Vempati incorporated is with regard to the musical score of the dance dramas. It is true that Vempati gave the top most importance to choreography and music direction. Music used in traditional pieces is limited to a few raga-scales. It is also not always certain that the ragas are so selected that they reflect the mood of the situation. Vempati implemented

a sea-change in dance-drama music. First of all, he sat with his librettist Bhujangaraya Sarma and his music director Sangeeta Rao to decide on the musical demands of the text. The criteria were simple. Music should reflect the mood of the scene and define the character. Vempati's penchant for classical music is certainly one of the main reasons for upholding the classical image of Kuchipudi. However, he always allowed his music director to experiment. Sangeeta Rao tells us how the "triumverate" decided on having Hindusthani ragas where desired. And at appropriate places, he also chose folk tunes. For example, for the tilting music of the milk maid and the buoyancy of the bangle-seller in *Chandalika*, proper folk tunes were used²²." Similarly in *Kalyana Rukmini*, the use of Hindusthani scales for emotional scenes and Carnatic scales for *samvadas* and for voicing morals went extremely well with the audience. Another major experiment in the use of music could be found in *Padmavathi Srinivasam*: all the popular features of Carnatic style - *kriti*, *padam*, *javali* and even *ragam-tanam-pallavi* - find their place in it to the connoisseur's delight.

Sandhi Vachanam (a connective interlude in prose) is a prominent narrative part of a yakshagana. When Vempati restructured *Srikrishna Parijatham*, the *Sandhi Vachanams* disappeared and in their place a whole scene of Narada giving the parijata flower to Srikrishna is introduced. True, a song in the place of a prose narration would extend the time of the dance drama, but it fits into Vempati's choreographic system. (It, in fact, adds to the dramatic effect of the play since both Srikrishna and Narada play their pranks and the scene works wonders from the point of view of the audience). Thus, in several places narrative episodes give place to dramatic ones. In *Bhama kalapam*, it is not only the minimized dialogue that is noteworthy, but using *padnyams* (poems) instead of dialogue sequences which added to the dramatic effect²³ :

Further, to make it more appealing to the wider
range of audiences, mainly cosmopolitan in nature,
I chose to minimize the dialogues and in their place,

introduce verses that give scope to *abhinaya* through gestures and facial expression, which can appeal to any kind of audience. Each and every *daruvu* right from the “Jadavrittantam” (the story of the popular plait of Satyabhama) was rewritten and choreographed. However, out of these *daruvus*, I wish to mention the daruvu, “Siggayenoyamma”. It was traditionally performed with Satyabhama covering her face with a veil suggesting her bashfulness. However, I felt that this should be done through *abhinaya* and, in the process, developed a dialogue between Satyabhama and Madhavi, her close confidante.

One example of how the appropriate *raga* is chosen to invoke the mood can be seen in the music maestro, Sangeeta Rao's own words²⁴ :

The use of Bilakshani Todi to bring out the feeling of separation in Lord Siva after the flames consume Sati, his consort, is apt as no other scale in any other style would have given the desired result. Similarly the *Desi* nature of the *ragas* for the marriage preparations and *raag* Punnagavarali while Parvati is made-up as a bride, reinforce the mood of the scene and invoke a feeling of rare experience in the viewers.

The scope for experiment is successfully tested in this ballet as the composition "Aamani vachchi vaali" set in a literary metre known as Khanda Gathi, in a raagamalika, is presented in *misra jaathi* “Jhampa Taala” using an unusual pace (tempo) of “Madhyama kaala”. The general practice is to use this *taala* in “dhruta kaala”. In effect the literary metg of “Khanda Gathi” is converted into musical metg of “Chaturasra Gathi” to make it amenable to the expression of Natya.



A scene from *Chandalika* choreographed by Vempati Chinna Satyam.
Vempati, Sobha Naidu and others in the ballet

Though these manifestations of music, text preparation and lighting are also essential in making the dance drama aesthetically pleasing, choreography is at the centre of it. Vempati's choreographic feats are too many to mention here. Two important examples may be cited: one is with regard to *Chandalika*, a unique play of Rabindranath Tagore. This is the only play choreographed by Vempati which has social milieu. It has a modern, social theme. To choreograph a dance drama based on mythology, there are precedents from tradition, at least a model. But Vempati has to rely entirely on his own imaginative capabilities. How he worked on it may be summed up in his own words²⁵ :

Responding to the requirement of the theme, I adopted my dance technique and created a folk milieu in the dances of flower vendors, milkmaids and bangle sellers. In the process, the dances were choreographed giving a lilt to the dance movements of the milkmaids and a buoyancy to those of the bangle seller adopting *gatis* like *chaturasra* and *tisra*. However, the significant part of my

experimentation in *Chandalika* is the dance I composed for Maya, mother of Prakriti (the main character in *Chandalika*). Conceding to the request of her daughter to bring back the Buddha Bhikshu, Maya invokes the evil spirits. In this scene, there is no song, I took the help of instrumental music and rhythm intermingled with *jatis* that contain such sounds which create an atmosphere of something unusual like, Dhim, tadhim, etc. In choreography, along with Maya, a group of six girls representing the spirits were introduced. Their costumes were suitably made with flowing garments and hair let loose. The movements were large, reaching out into the air, creating circles in the space. Starting with a new tempo, the dance of Maya, encircled by six spirits who dance at her command, reaches its climax in fast tempo within a span of ten minutes. Though some expressed their doubts about its appeal during the practice sessions, my persistence to retain it proved to be right, since it is one of the scenes that really moved the audiences.

Choreography also includes using space, composition and decor. Traditional yakshaganas had no concept of composition and using the entire stage space judiciously and aesthetically. Vempati's imaginative work in this area equals the work of Rukmini Devi Arundale in her dance dramas, and, in fact, goes nearer to some of the experiments in modern dance in recent years.

The use of symbolic decor, by and large, is a common feature in dance dramas all over the country. Vempati used this technique again and again. For example, in *Padmavati Srinivasa Kalyanam*, "suggestive properties like a swan and a lotus, painted on a curtain and hung at the back as a drop to suggest Brahmaloaka and the crescent moon and a trident (trishula) to suggest Kailasa were used very imaginatively."²⁶

One of the most fascinating elements of Vempati's choreography lies in his imaginative creation of "human decor" on the stage. Unlike the general setting in the background, which is sometimes elaborate and sometimes suggestive, the "human decor" may be defined as a choreographer's "visual imagery" of using human artists for creating non-human effects, be it as animals or mountains, or simply to extract a striking visual image.

In *Padmavati Srinivasa Kalyanam* he brought a cow and a calf on to the stage with four artists. One artist bent over the other at a distance and both covered by a white cloth made the cow. A tail and a cow mask completed the figure. So was the case with the calf. The movements of the cows were carefully choreographed to synchronize with the dance movements of the golla bhama. Ploughing the field with bullocks on either side of the plough is again a similar "trick" which mesmerized the audiences in the same play.²⁷

The "human decor" is nowhere better shown than in the "Sati Dahana" episode in *Hara Vilasam*. It is an effective scene in which Daksha's daughter burns herself after she is insulted. This could either be simply narrated through a song as a narrative commentary by the singer or can be visually presented through lighting effects. Vempati was not satisfied. He wanted something to be "shown on the stage", to have a strong visual effect. He created a wonderful stage picture through "human decor", which highlighted the entire scene and made it memorable: This is what Vempati has to say about choreographing this scene.²⁸

During its choreography, especially in the scene of Satidahana, where Sati burns herself after being humiliated by Daksha. The question was how to show it. A ready-made suggestion was that it should be portrayed with the help of lighting technique. I was not convinced. After prolonged thought, I felt I should create the needed effect through movement and *aharya*. A group of girls dressed in red were used for the same. As soon as Sati tries to immolate herself, these girls rush on to the stage in a single

file with swift movement, throwing up their arms while quickly fluttering them to suggest the flames and engulfing Sati, indicating the flames engulfing her. This was one experiment which was applauded by no less a person than Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan.

If I am asked to mention one single major contribution of Vempati to Kuchipudi I would say "his visual aesthetics". He knew the nature of the theatrical practices and had a thorough grounding in rhythm and pace. He has gained a fine sense of colour and shade, a mastery over stage compositions and stage pictures. Adept in Natya Sastra practices, he easily correlated them with the traditional practices in which he was trained early in life. But, above all, he has the audience and their enjoyment and approval at the top of his work's ideal. Perhaps, to say that would be, at least, a half-truth. It might seem that his sense of "visual aesthetics" is aimed at pleasing his audience. But, I think, the fruition of all artistic endeavour emanates from an artist's desire for creating and realizing a soul-filling experience, first of all to himself and then to all those who share the experience. For the best among artists, audience enjoyment and self-fulfilment are two sides of the same coin. And Vempati Chinna Satyam is easily one of such best that recreated a dance idiom to suit his contemporary social, cultural and aesthetic milieu.

Chinna Satyam travelled widely both in India and abroad. Every town in Andhra Pradesh was proud to sponsor his dance dramas and every city in India welcomed him and scores of his students for the prestigious festivals. His tours abroad were numerous, but mention may be made of the following as the most important ones. Satyam's first trip abroad was to London and France (1971), followed by South America and the Caribbean Islands, for the Festival of India (1973), London, again (1974), Middle East (1979), Sri Lanka (1980), Singapore and Malaysia (1981), U.S.S.R. (1982), U.S.A (1984), U.S.S.R, for the Festival of India (1987), Arab countries (1988), Europe (1989), U.S.A (1990), Germany for the Festival of India (1991), and U.S.A (1994).

Satyam was the recipient of several honours and awards, the most important ones being the “Asthana Natyacharya” of Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam (1976) ; “Kalaprapoorna” (Honorary Doctorate), Andhra University (1980); Sangert Natak Akadami (New Delhi) award (1981) ; A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi’s “Bharata Kala Prapoorna” (1982) ; D.Litt. from Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati (1983) ; Presentation of the



Vempati receiving ‘Padmabhushan’ award from President K.R.Narayanan

golden key, by the mayor of Miami, U.S.A (1984) ; Kalidas Samman, Ujjain by the Madhya Pradesh government (1992), TTK memorial award by the Music Academy, Chennai (1992), ‘Sur Singar Award’, Mumbai (1993), ‘Artist of the decade’ award by *Sruthi* (1993) ; ‘Kalaimamani’ by Government of Tamil Nadu (1994) ; “Padma Bhushan” (1998) ; Sangeet Natak Akademi’s Fellowship (2001) and many more.

Vempati Chinna Satyam passed away on July 29, 2012 at Chennai after a brief illness. He left behind a legacy which should be treasured, perpetuated and remembered.

References

1. In this age of Diaspora, tours are the major media of communication. Great masters, with their single-minded devotion to the art, have always helped students to establish schools both in India and abroad. Vempati toured several countries either on the invitation of the students, an ICCR exchange programme or a Festival of India programme.
2. Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry was one of the three leaders of Kuchipudi renaissance, the other two being Chinta Venkataramaiah and Vempati Venkatanarayana. A great scholar, performer and teacher, Vedantam is a Guru's Guru, for all great teachers of the next generation were his disciples.
3. Satyam's work in films was two-fold. He assisted his cousin, Vempati Peda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavaiah with credits being given to them. He must have worked for over 50 films like this. Though he independently choreographed dance items in "Peda Raitu" (1952), he was given credit as a Dance Director only in "Parvati Kalyanam" (1956). During the next few years, he was in and out of films.
4. For Shanta Rao's involvement with the school, see Andavilli Satyanarayana & Pemmaraju Surya Rao: *Dr. Vempati - Maestro with a Mission*, Vijayawada, 1994, p.8.
5. Kuchipudi Art Academy, started in 1963, is a centre to train the young aspirants in the Kuchipudi style. Its objectives were eight-fold, the most important one being training and dissemination of Kuchipudi. For the eight objectives, please see *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996.
6. A.S. Raman, *Times Weekly*, April 8, 1973.
7. Padmashri Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma is a well-known Kuchipudi performer, donning female roles. His major roles are Satyabhama in *Bhama kalapam*, and Usha in *Usha Parinayam*.
8. Some of the more well-known disciples are: Vyjayantimala, Hema Malini, Sobha Naidu, Prabha, Bala, Kamala Reddy, Sasikala, Kamadev, Manju Bhargavi, Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma, Madhavapeddy Murthy, Vedantam Ramu, Kalpalathika, Anuradha Nehru, Anuradha Jonnalagadda, Padma Menon, Kshemavathi, Sri Vidya and of course, Ravi Shankar, his own son.
9. Regisseur: an artistic director of any play. A French word used in English.

10. K. Subadra Murthy (ed.) *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay. 1996, p. 97.
11. 'Drama' is usually considered a *drisya kavya*, "an epic poem for seeing". A solo number is like a short dramatic poem (*khanda-kavya*) which is set for presentation and spectators' viewing.
12. *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 97.
13. For a detailed description of "Jaatakam", see M. Nagabhushana Sarma, "Vedantama Laxminarayana Sastry: His Life, Times and Achievement," *Nartanam*, Vol. II, No. 2 (April-June, 2002).
14. Vempati himself said that he took care to "stylize the entry and exit of each number". See Vempati Chinna Satyam, "My Experiments with Kuchipudi", *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 97.
15. Ibid.
16. Examples of how and what kind of technical aspects of *angikabhinaya* Vempati had made use of are narrated shortly in the *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 97.
17. Ibid. 18. Ibid. 19. Ibid, p. 95.
20. Sangeeta Rao P, "Kuchipudi Sangeeta Nruthya Rupakam", *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*; Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 154.
21. Subbudu as quoted in *Dr. Vempati: Maestro with a Mission*, by Andavilli Satyanarayana and Pemmaraju Surya Rao, 1994, p. 104.
22. Sangeeta Rao P, "Kuchipudi Sangeeta Nruthya Rupakam", *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 154.
23. Chinna Satyam, "My Experiments with Kuchipudi", *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 96.
24. Sangeeta Rao P. "Kuchipudi Sangeeta Nruthya Rupakam", *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 155.
25. Vempati Chinna Satyam "My Experiments with Kuchipudi", *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir*, Kuchipudi Kala Kendra, Bombay, 1996, p. 95.
26. Ibid, p. 96.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid, pp. 96-97.

X

Beyond the Boundaries of the Traditional Families

Introduction

In the annals of contemporary dance history very few performers accredited themselves with dance knowledge outside their own particular style of performance. Very few looked at their own regional form from a broader Indian perspective for creating a wider framework for their creative work in dance. What happens when you look at a regional form (even if it is your own) from a national perspective is that you evaluate it from the point of view of national standards without losing the basic, intrinsic, native characteristics.

When people outside the traditional Kuchipudi families started learning Kuchipudi, there was an interaction between the outside social and cultural formulations and the local conventions and beliefs. Those people that came from outside the framework of strictly Kuchipudi background stood to gain because they were exposed to two different cultural modalities and assimilated the two or put one in contrast with the other which opened up several creative possibilities as is evident from the experiments of either C.R.Acharyulu or Nataraja Ramakrishna. In coming to terms with an insider-outsider dichotomy, these outsiders had created a world of their own in which Kuchipudi stands as a strong base and their own, other influences had a bearing on the central creative perspective.

This practice, in fact, started with Ayyanki Thandava Krishna, who studied under Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, performed under his guidance along with Vedantam Jagannadha

Sarma, giving credence to abhinaya-oriented solos and duets. But, after the demise of his guru, Thandava Krishna became a researcher and a propagator of the art.

C.R.Acharyulu was one of the several people who came with a different dance orientation to study Kuchipudi. He was brought up on a strong temple dance tradition of Andhra and had his Kuchipudi training under Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and the Nangigadda devadasis. He thus made use of his training in *aradhana nrityas* to restructure some of his Kuchipudi yakshaganas. His experiments in solos and group dances show a strong influence of both Kuchipudi and temple dance traditions.

Nataraja Ramakrishna, an ardent lover of all the Andhra traditions of dance, is a scholar - performer who has done yeoman service to the propagation of Kuchipudi. He came to learn Kuchipudi from Laxminarayana Sastry after learning *abhinaya* of the devadasi orientation, after learning Kathak and after undergoing training in Bharatanatyam at Meenakshisundaram pillai's Gurukulam. With his exposure to several dance traditions of India, Nataraja Ramakrishna gained by his study of Kuchipudi, especially in differentiating between the 'nattuva mela' tradition and the 'natya mela' tradition and in his imaginative synthesis of the different styles as per his requirements. This enabled Ramakrishna to formulate his own creative style of presentation.

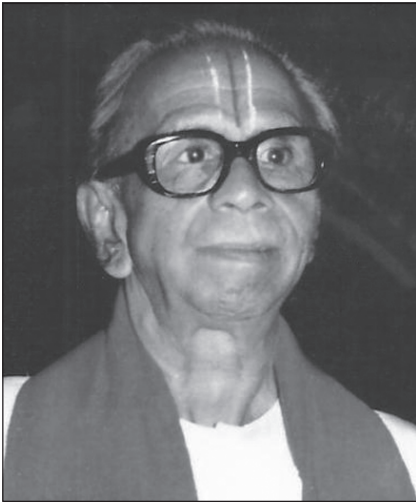
Similarly, Korada Narasimha Rao's early training in Kuchipudi at Eluru and later with Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry had given him a firm base when he was exposed to the international scenario and danced in the company of Indrani Rehman and later when he created several nationally relevant dance dramas. In the same way, D.Y. Sampath Kumar, who studied under Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, came from the background of folk dances and when he learnt the classical dance, it gave him a strong grammar and vocabulary with the aid of which he created several group and solo sequences.

All the four dancer-gurus, with their firm grounding in other

forms of dance, could make a meaningful interaction with Kuchipudi. That the Kuchipudi tradition helped these people to find their own tools for creativity and gave them an opportunity to experiment in their different areas of dance expression goes to prove how fertile and flexible the Kuchipudi art form is.

In later years several other dancers who belonged to non-traditional families learnt Kuchipudi and often performed Kuchipudi items. The difference between these and the old masters lies in their professional attitude and inquisitiveness to gain by the classical Kuchipudi tradition and they were the first dancers outside the strictly traditional and village-centred milieu and, because of this attitude, remained the best among them.

C.R. Acharyulu (1919-1998)



C.R. Acharyulu (Chilakamarri Ramacharyulu) was born at Nuzvid, Krishna district on 15th of August, 1919. Hailing from a family of traditional natyacharyas attached to Vaishnava temples, Acharyulu was brought up in the environment of temple rituals and performing arts. Aspiring to know the dance traditions beyond the temple dances, Acharyulu walked all the way to Kuchipudi to learn

dance from Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry. Incidentally, he was one of the first two or three students outside the children of the traditional families to learn Kuchipudi.

Even before he was twenty, Acharyulu toured Saiva temples in the South, observed the “tandava” postures critically and read

books on the subject to formulate a whole repertoire of dance numbers on Shiva. He had researched into “sandhya tandavam”, “lasya tandavam”, “urdhwa tandavam” and “Tripura Sundari tandavam” besides learning “Navasandhi Natyam” with appropriate *talas*. On the advice of his guru Vedantam, Acharyulu learnt *padams* and *javalis* from the Nangigadda devadasis.

Acharyulu was one of the first Telugu scholars to have taken interest in “Tolu Bommalata” (the shadow puppet theatre) and produced puppet plays in later years at Darpana, Ahmedabad. He studied the *karana* patterns in sculptures, in Natya Sastra texts and the *karanas* used in practice in different dance styles and formulated a whole grammar for the *karana* system. He also studied the *cari bhedas* in different traditions and wrote critical articles on the subject.

After practising and teaching Kuchipudi for a short period in Nuzvid, his native town, Acharyulu moved to Eluru, a district headquarters in West Godavari district and started a school called Nataraja Natya Samiti. In fact, he was one of the earliest teachers who had gone out of one’s hometown to establish schools in big towns.

At Eluru, several later-day gurus and performers were his disciples - Gudimetla Krishna and Korada Narasimha Rao being the most prominent. It was at Eluru that Acharyulu started special training programmes in *karana* and *tandava* traditions. He choreographed two dance dramas - “Amritha Mathanam” and “Ulupi-Arjun”, which were a raving success. He also rechoreographed the traditional Kuchipudi number, “Artha Nareeswara” using the ‘lasya’ and ‘tandava’ movements, a result of his research.

Acharyulu was particularly patronised by the ‘Mote’ family - the zamindars of Eluru. He taught the daughters of Mote Ganga Raju and Krishna Rao, who later received central government scholarships to study Kuchipudi. With this he was known throughout the district as an able teacher with an aptitude for

research who used his research findings in new choreographies. Yamini Krishna Murthy learnt from him the *karana* structures and temple dances. Cine actor Rajasulochana invited the guru to teach at her Madras institute, “Pushpanjali”, which he did periodically.

In 1956 Acharyulu was invited by Mrinalini Sarabhai to come to her institute, Darpana Academy, at Ahmedabad and be in charge of Kuchipudi and puppet divisions. Several of his choreographic works like “Mandodari Sapatham” and “Alivelu Manga Vilasam” belonged to this period. The latter one was based on Annamacharya’s *kritis*.

At Darpana Academy Acharyulu taught Kuchipudi to Mrinalini Sarabhai, by then a celebrated Bharata Natyam dancer, and her daughter, Mallika Sarabhai. He also taught Voleti Rangamani, his second daughter whom he had specially trained in temple dances, and more importantly, “Simha Nandini”.

Acharyulu’s experiments in choreography are as varied and rich as his research work. He developed unique dance numbers with complex foot work and reworked on the ancient tradition of drawing pictures on the floor while dancing. He heard from elders that, before a temple procession started, dancers would draw the picture of the *vahanam* of the presiding deity and the deity’s chariot would travel on the picture - painting. It is a symbol of art’s humble homage to the deity, for in such drawing of a picture all the fine arts and performing arts pay their homage to the deity. The first of these experiments was drawing the picture of a lion, the *vahanam* of goddess Parvathi while doing *nritta* sequences. The drawing by itself needs a challenging technical skill because it needs a perfect synchronization of *raga* and *tala* and by the time the *tala* cycle is complete the drawing of the picture must also be complete. When he did it for the first time in Darpany Academy in 1960, the whole Indian dance community came to know of Andhra’s rich temple traditions.

“Simhanandini” is set in “Simhanandani tala” and a lion’s picture is evolved through dance. This experiment was soon



The drawing of Simhanandini through foot work is C.R's finest achievement

followed by “Mayura Nandini” in “Mayura tala”, drawing a peacock and “Mahalaxmi udbhavam” in “Padma talam”. All these are originally drawn with rice powder on the floor. But, in later years, when he was performing for the public, Acharyulu used a big sieve with coloured powder and, after the dance number is over if you remove the sieve, you have the figure on leather, card board or cloth. He called it, after the old temple tradition, “Prekhani Natyam”.

Acharyulu's other major choreographic works include “Ragamalika Navarasa Nrityam”, based on the *nava-rasas* and in honour of goddess Bhramaramba of Sri Sailam, “Satyabhama kalapam”, a re-working of the story of Sri Krishna and Satyabhama and “Dasavataram”. Prominent among the yakshaganas in the Kuchipudi style are “Alivelu Manga vilasam”, “Srinivasa Ramayanam”, “Deva Nartaki”, “Tripurasura samharam”, “Parvati parinayam” and “Gangavataranam”. He also choreographed

several solos both in the Kuchipudi style and the temple dance style.

Acharyulu strongly believed in disseminating dance knowledge he had acquired not only through teaching students, but also through writing. He has several books and research papers to his credit both on Kuchipudi and temple dances. His publications include *Kuchipudi Aradhana Nrityamulu* (1968), a book on Kuchipudi and temple dance traditions sponsored by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, *Srinivasa Ramayanam* (1970), a book on the art of puppetry with instructions regarding the learning process and *Understanding Kuchipudi* (1993), with Mallika Sarabhai, a workbook on how to learn Kuchipudi. Besides, Acharyulu has written over thirty research articles and published them in various journals, which are not yet brought under one cover.

C.R.Acharyulu visited a number of countries on different assignments. He led a team of shadow puppeteers to Japan for the Unima festival in 1978 and visited a number of countries including the Netherlands, Belgium, West Germany and U.K., presenting the dance recitals of his disciples.

Among Acharyulu's innumerable disciples, the famous scholar - performer Rita Devi (U.S.A), Jayashree (Mumbai), Mallika Sarabhai (Ahmedabad), Voleti Rangamani (Hyderabad), Uma Vyjayanthi (Dublin), Sumathi Kaushal (Hyderabad / U.S.A), Neeraja Paul (Kolkata), Vyjayanthi Kashi (Bangalore), Pratibha Prahlad (Bangalore) and Vasanthalexmi Narasimhacharyulu (Chennai) have already been recognised as prominent dancers. Several others like Gudimetla Krishna, Korada Narasimha Rao, Smitha Shastry, V.Rangamani, Radha Sridhar and Rajamani Mohan have chosen to be teachers of Kuchipudi.

C.R.Acharyulu was also a recipient of several state and national honours. He was a central Sangeet Natak Akademi Awardee (1978). He also received the Gujarat State Sangeeta, Nritya, Natya Academy award (1980), the Bombay Andhra Mahasabha award (1981), Saranga Dev fellowship awarded by



Acharyulu receiving the Sangeet Natak Akademi award from President Neelam Sanjeeva Reddy

the Sur Singar Samsad, Bombay (1981), Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi award (1987) and the Andhra Sabha, Calcutta award for eminence in the field of Kuchipudi (1980).

The workshops on *karanas* that Acharyulu conducted in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal were very popular among students of several dance styles.

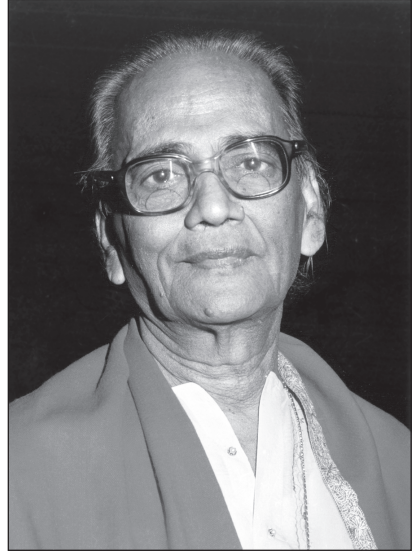
A documentary on Acharyulu was featured under the series “Great Masters of India” on Door Darshan national network.

In later years the savant started two institutions to impart training in Kuchipudi and temple dances - “Abhinaya Darpana” at Hyderabad (1980) and “Nataraja Nilayam” at Ahmedabad (1985).

A life-long devotee and ardent practitioner of Kuchipudi, Acharyulu passed away in 1998.

Nataraja Ramakrishna (1923-2007)

Nataraja Ramakrishna¹ is perhaps the best-scholar performer with regard to the dance traditions of Andhra. As a dancer he has combined in himself the dramatic enunciation of *bhava* as in the temple dancers, with the rhythmic flow of graceful movements as in Kathak and with the quick succession of meaningfully suggestive *mudras* as in Kuchipudi. Though he had undergone training in Kathak,



Bharatanatyam, temple dance traditions and Kuchipudi, his preferences all through his life were the dance traditions of Andhra - the ‘nattuva mela’ tradition of the temple dancers and the ‘natya mela’ tradition of Kuchipudi.

Born in the Bali islands on March 21, 1923 to Rama Mohana Rao and Damayanthi Devi, Ramakrishna hailed from a wealthy family from Razole in West Godavari district of Andhra Pradesh. Ramakrishna’s early obsession for dance was ignited when he went to see the performance of an angelic temple dancer and he was never out of the magic of that divine art throughout his life.

When Ramakrishna insisted that he would pursue dance as a vocation, his father was furious. Notwithstanding his father’s apathy, Ramakrishna went to Sri Kalahasti, with the assuring help of his brother, and started learning dance under Nayudupeta Rajamma, one of the most knowledgeable and respected dancers of the day and an expert in *aradhana* and *bhagavatha* traditions.

He was there for two years, not only learning dance but also the nuances in singing and presentational techniques. Under pressure from his family, Ramakrishna had to continue his collegiate studies at Madras. As his father was a staunch follower of the tenets of Ramakrishna Mutt, he was made to stay on the Mutt's campus. Here he had virtually read through the philosophical works of Ramakrishna Paramahansa and Vivekananda, as well as the works of eminent aestheticians like Ananda Kumara Swamy. He saw several Bharatanatyam performances, the influence of which took him to Pandanallur to take training from the great Bharatanatyam guru, Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai.

The family, weary of his artistic ways, moved him this time to Nagpur for his further studies. He joined the Hislop college for his graduate studies, but even here he continued his dance training and practice. He came into contact with two great masters of Kathak, Karthikji and Kalyanji and learnt Kathak from them. His analytical mind and his exposure to several dance styles made him believe that each dance style is complementary to the other and each one is capable of interpreting any given text within its own parametres. Ramakrishna took it as a challenge that he could dance to any text instantaneously and that brought him several followers including the native ruler of the Bhandara region, Raja Ganpath Rao Pandya. The Bhandara ruler, who was fascinated by Ramakrishna's improvisational excellence, especially during a competition among well-known dancers in which Ramakrishna was the winner, gave him the title, "Nataraj".

A strong urge to come back to his native state, after a gap of several years, landed him in Nellore where he started teaching, researching and experimenting. His teaching assignments took him to Guntur and from there to Visakhapatnam. His constant search for the roots of dance traditions of Andhra received recognition from and encouragement by a set of great Sanskrit and dance scholars of the day, including Prof. Vissa Appa Rao, a Professor of Physics and the principal of the University college, Andhra

University. On Prof. Rao's advice, Ramakrishna had started researching into Kshetranya's immortal *padams*.

While he was in Visakhapatnam, Ramakrishna got an opportunity to study Kuchipudi under Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, the veteran *abhinaya* expert. Ramakrishna was so impressed by Vedantam's *hastabhinaya* that he soon learnt it. Especially delightful was the way in which the guru used different *mudras* to interpret an object or a person "in action" with a 'cluster of images', which, when shown in quick succession, opens up a whole story. Ramakrishna mastered this and made use of the technique while choreographing several solos on Krishna. Ramakrishna also learnt Bhamakalapam from Vedantam. In later years, Ramakrishna combined the expressive modes of Nayadupeta Rajamma, rhythmic variations of Kathak and the sensitivity of *mudrabhinaya* of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry to form into a unified style of his own.

Ramakrishna's urge to know more about Andhra's other dance idioms took him to Pithapuram, an ancient temple town to learn a rare Bhagavatha tradition of temple dancers, "Nava Janardana Parijatham" from another versatile temple dancer, Pendyala Satyabhama.

Having equipped himself with the theoretical and practical knowledge regarding Andhra's varied dance traditions and a good fifteen years of experience in performing and training, Ramakrishna journeyed to Hyderabad to establish his dance school, "Nritya Niketan". Ramakrishna's Hyderabad sojourn was an auspicious beckoning for the several Andhra traditions to flourish. Ramakrishna's famous dance dramas at Nritya Niketan - including "Kumarabambhavam", "Megha Sandesam" and "Balaji" - made him one of the first to choreograph new dance dramas based on the tradition of Kuchipudi. For "Kumarabambhavam" he received not only critical applause, but an award for best production in Kalidas Samaroh, Ujjain in 1963. The production received a silver 'kalasam', a plaque and a citation from the then Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Kailashnath Katju.

When the state Sangeet Natak Akademi was started in 1956, Ramakrishna was nominated as a member and became its spokesman on dance. Ramakrishna's work in the Akademi was god-sent to realize his dreams of propagating Andhra traditions of dance, both outside Andhra and abroad. Just at that time, an unfortunate incident at Delhi sparked off an unnecessary controversy in Andhra. At an All India classical Dance Festival held at Delhi, a young girl, Kanchanamala was invited to perform Kuchipudi. There was a committee of experts which felt that Kuchipudi could not be accepted as a classical dance form. This saddened and angered Nataraja Ramakrishna as it did several Telugu art lovers. At the instance of Ramakrishna, the State Akademi decided to organize a seminar on Kuchipudi and other classical dance traditions of Andhra. Ramakrishna was its convenor. Experts and performers from all over Andhra attended the seminar. Nirmala Joshi, the then secretary, Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, attended the sessions on all the three days and saw each of the performances. Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma performed Bhama kalapam. Nataraj himself sang, demonstrated and talked about the richness of Kuchipudi.

Ramakrishna, as the convenor of the festival, widened the scope of the festival, to include a demonstration of the devadasi's temple dance tradition. Marampalli Vaidehi and Induvadana, belonging to the "Nava Janardanam" tradition of temple dances from East Godavari district demonstrated *abhinaya* to a Sanskrit *sloka*, interpreting the text by providing commentary, again in Sanskrit. The demonstration of a single *sloka* took a full two hours. This was an eye opener to one and all. Nirmala Joshi declared that if these two Andhra traditions - Kuchipudi and the Abhinaya school - were not classical, none could be called classical in the entire country. Ramakrishna was sure that Kuchipudi, when systematically learnt and performed, was in no way inferior to any other Indian classical dance style. However, he also realized, sadly, that due to social and cultural reasons, the inimitable *abhinaya* style was slowly becoming extinct.



Nataraja Ramakrishna, convener of the festival with Pasala Suryachandra Rao, Vedantam Raghavaiah, Kavalam Narayana Phanikar, Potukuchi Sambasivarao, Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, A.R.Krishna, Bipin Singh, Sampath Kumar, Jhaveri Sisters, Sambhu Maharaj and E.Krishna Iyer

Meanwhile Ramakrishna took to writing on the various aspects of dance, focussing mainly on Andhra's rich legacy of dance traditions. His books, totalling more than forty, remain to be the only documented material on all the dance traditions of Andhra. He also enunciated the "ata kramam" (the process of dance exposition) for some of the well known Kshetranya *padams*.

Ramakrishna's efforts in showcasing the Andhra traditions for a national audience became fruitful in the All India dance festival, conducted under the joint auspices of the central and the state Akademi-s in 1964 at Hyderabad. Veteran Kuchipudi dancer and movie director, Vedantam Raghavaiah was invited to preside over the festival. On the last day Raghavaiah was honoured with the title "Bharata Kala Prapoorna". Nataraj, as the convener of the festival, saw to it that all stalwarts of the different classical styles participated in it. With the performances by Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma under the leadership of Chinta Krishna Murthy, a new chapter in the history of Kuchipudi has started.

Ramakrishna, meanwhile, concentrated on Andhra's *lasya* tradition which was hitherto the proud treasure of the devadasis.



Kala Krishna as Bhama
in *Navajanardhanam*



A sequence from *Perini Sivathandavam*



Nataraja Ramakrishna being felicitated by N. Sanjeeva Reddy after he received the Swarna kalasam at Ujjain for his *Kumarasambhavam*

He learnt both the Kuchipudi and Nava Janardanam styles of Bhama Kalapam and *pada abhinaya*. Since Kuchipudi had come of age and there were a few stalwarts performing and propagating it, Ramakrishna thought that he should now devote his time for getting proper recognition to the *abhinaya* tradition. With his past experience as a field worker and researcher and with the help of Annabathula Buli Venkataratnamma, a well-known exponent of Bhama kalapam and Golla kalapam, Ramakrishna went from door to door in search of former temple dancers who still remembered their tradition. To his astonishment, Ramakrishna located sixteen such veteran performers, all above sixty, and brought them on to one platform. He was singularly responsible for doing a seminar-cum-demonstration lecture series in 1970 at Rajahmundry and called it “Abhinaya sadassu”. The seminar resulted in reviving the three parts of the temple and court dances - the aradhana, kutcheri and Bhagavatham - and the sadas called this clubbing “Andhra Natyam” - the essence of Andhra’s lasya tradition. As a part of the training programme in this style, Ramakrishna chose one of his more talented disciples, Kala Krishna, to learn “Nava Janardanam”, a text of Bhama kalapam performed in the nine Janardana and Kunti Madhava temples in the East Godavari district.

In 1980, when the state Sangeet Natak Akademi was trifurcated as Sangeeta, Nritya and Nataka Akademi-s, Ramakrishna was the natural choice to be the President of the Nritya Akademi. One of the first things he implemented as president was to have a training programme for Kuchipudi teachers who had learnt the art from various teachers. He thought that a uniform training pattern must be developed and a standardization of the syllabi would facilitate it. So a training programme was started at Kuchipudi under the able direction of Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam.

Ramakrishna, through his studies, found out that an all male dance called “Prerana” or “Perini” was performed in the Shiva temples during the Kakatiya rule and started searching for

materials. He studied *Nritta Ratnavali* of Jayapa Senani, which gave details of the dance form and an ancient text, *Bharatar-nava* provided some *jatis* used in ancient time in Prerana. He restructured the Perini dance which is awe-inspiring and spectacular. Ramakrishna choreographed an all-night performance of Perini and presented it in Ramappa temple of Warangal district. He also started an institution called “Perini International” to teach this manly art form.



Ramakrishna in a lec-dem at
Ramappa Temple

Ramakrishna also turned his attention to one of the folk *kalapa* traditions of northern Andhra, “Toorpu Bhagavatham”. In 1980 the A.P. Nritya Akademi conducted a seminar-cum-festival of Toorpu Bhagavatham with expert teams participating in it. Similarly, he strove to bring recognition to “Chindu Bhagavatham”, a tradition of ritualistic, yakshagana performances practised by the dalit communities in Telangana.

In his last days, Ramakrishna spent his energies to see that a memorial was constructed to the legendary dancer Taramati, a court dancer of the Asaf Jahi king, Quli Qutb Shah. Taramati and her singer sister Premavati, who lived and practised the arts in Taramati Baradari on the outskirts of Hyderabad reflected the essence of Indian art traditions which always went beyond caste

and religious considerations. The government respectfully conceded his request and renovated the monument. It has become a place for an annual festival of music and dance, reflecting the cosmopolitan culture of Andhra.

Ramakrishna was appointed a Professor at the Hyderabad Central University, where he continued his twin interests in life - teaching and research. His innumerable students spread the globe over and more importantly Uma Rama Rao, Sumathi Kaushal Sunanda Murthy, Raghava Kumari, Suvarchala, Usha Datar and Kala Krishna have done or have been doing exceedingly meaningful work.

Ramakrishna's life-long devotion to the study, teaching and propagation of the artistic traditions of Andhra was well recognised. Several awards and honours came his way. The most important of these include the title "Nataraj" conferred on him by the ruler of the Bhandara state, Sri Raja Ganapati Rao Pandya, when Ramakrishna was hardly eighteen ; "Bharata Kala



The first Nataraja Ramakrishna lecture at the Hyderabad Central University. Seen here from left to right: Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan who delivered the lecture, Dr. Sanjay, Dean, Sarojini Naidu School, Ramakrishna and Prof. Anuradha

Prapoorna” by the A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1968 ; “Kala Prapoorna”, an Honourary Doctorate conferred on him by the Andhra University (1981) ; “Asthana Natyacharya” of Srisailam Devasthanam (1980) ; “Asthana Natyacharya” of the Government of Andhra Pradesh (1980) ; “Padmashri” by the Government of India ; Professor Emeritus, Hyderabad Central University. The university of Hyderabad also instituted a Lecture, every year, in honour of Nataraja Ramakrishna.

A simple man and a noble visionary, Nataraja Ramakrishna strove to highlight Andhra’s dance culture in every activity he had undertaken. After a brief illness, Ramakrishna passed away on June 7, 2011 leaving a void in the annals of Andhra’s dance history.

Korada Narasimha Rao (1936-2007)

Born in 1930 to Venkayamma and Appalaswamy in a poor farmer’s family, Korada Narasimha Rao had a flair for dance since childhood. Exposed to rural dance and drama forms early in life, Korada was influenced by the Kuchipudi yakshaganams and especially by the *tamasa* roles that Mahankali Satyanarayana donned on the stage. He was particularly enamoured of characters like



Banasura and Hiranya kasipa and started imitating the Kuchipudi maestro. Since childhood he was trained in folk arts like “Chekka Bhajana” and so rhythm and dancing to the *tala* were a part of Korada’s early training. Seeing his interest in folk arts, especially folk dances and dramas, his maternal uncle, Majji Rama Rao, a well-respected stage actor at Eluru, groomed him in folk dances.

Korada's urge to learn Kuchipudi, however, continued. He joined the private dance school started by Gudimetla Krishna in Eluru to learn Kuchipudi. After a couple of years a moment to fulfil his life's ambition came his way. He heard that guru C.R. Acharyulu came to Eluru and would stay there for quite some time for he was teaching the girls of the famous 'Mote' family - the zamindars of Eluru. The wife of the then zamindar, Mote Krishna Rao - Satyavati Devi - invited Acharyulu to teach Kuchipudi to her son, Ramesh. Korada took the opportunity to approach C.R. Acharyulu to teach him and the latter gladly accepted to do so.

Early in his training Korada happened to see Kuchipudi's *Usha Parinayam* in which Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma donned the role of Usha and Mahankali Satyanarayana, of Banasura. In the presentation of their roles, both of them showed one common element, according to Korada. In both the characters, two dual emotions were ably shown, one following the other, in quick succession. In the case of Usha, fear and shyness and in the case of Banasura anger and love. He wondered how they mastered the art exhibiting such dual emotions with such success. Korada, at nights, would stand before a mirror and practise the emotions.

Seeing Korada's interest, Acharyulu sent Korada to his own guru, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, with whom Korada studied for two more years. While Vedantam taught Korada solo items, Acharyulu taught him how to portray characters in yakshaganas.

At the age of 30, Korada got an opportunity to perform in international festivals. As a participant in the international cultural festival conducted in Paris in 1960, Korada won the best male dancer award and that gave him an opportunity to visit several countries in Europe and U.S.A. in the group led by Indrani Rahman². During the next year, he visited the border areas of the country, giving dance performances to entertain the soldiers.

Korada choreographed several yakshaganas in the Kuchipudi style. His *Prahlada Charitra*³ was a masterpiece in



Korada as Bhasmasura

which he implemented the dual emotions he thought were the best part of Kuchipudi. *Kumara Sambhavam* in which he did the role of Siva was performed several times all over the country. He also choreographed *Gita-Govindam* and *Annamacharya*. In this *prati-nayaka* character portrayals, Korada was very impressive with his bold and reverberating voice. Other *prati-nayaka* characters he donned with aplomb were Mahishasura, Banasura and Bhasmasura. Only in *Gita Govindam* he did the role of Sri Krishna, no less impressively. He also

acted as Vishnuchitta in *Goda Kalyanam*, a dance drama based on Sri Krishna Devaraya's *Amukta Malyada*.

Korada was equally felicitous with modern dance dramas on social and political themes as he was with mythological yakshaganas. His two plays on India's war with China and Pakistan evoked great response. "Chinese Agression" (1964) and "War with Pakistan" (1964) were so well received that he was requested to perform them in the border areas. Korada's dance dramas on social themes were also received well. *Kutumba Samrakshanam* under the family welfare propagation programme was taken to every village in Andhra. *Nava Jeevanam*, a play on co-operation was also popular.

Korada established his dance institution, “Sri Nritya Bharati” at Eluru in 1953 and his yakshaganas and dance dramas were performed under its banner. In later years, he expanded the work of his organization by starting several branches in Delhi, Trivendrum, Hyderabad and Bangalore. Yamini Krishna Murthy, Geeta Chatterjee, Gopi Krishna and Sarala Kumari were his disciples.

Korada had his stint in the cinema world as well. He played the role of Shiva in the dance drama “Girija kalyanam”, in the movie “Rahasyam”, directed by Vedantam Raghavaiah. It was the best example of the spirit of Kuchipudi that was shown in Telugu movies. Another of his movie escapades was when director K.Viswanath cast Korada as Narakasura in the dance drama choreographed in Kuchipudi style in the movie, “Siri Muvvala Simhanadam”, in which Kala Krishna, the prime disciple of Nataraja Ramakrishna , played the role of Satyabhama.

Korada was associated with several dance institutions and academic bodies of the universities. He served as a member of the Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi and when the Nritya Akademi was started, he served as its Vice-President. Korada was a member of the syllabus committee appointed by the A.P.Government to frame syllabi for several courses in Kuchipudi. He was a member of the Board of Studies of Andhra University’s Department of Fine Arts for ten years.

Korada received several awards, the most important being the title, “Bharata Kala Prapoorna” given by the A.P.Sangeeta Natak Akademi. He received the central Sangeet Natak Akademi’s award for Kuchipudi dance.

Korada passed away in 2007.

D.Y. Sampath Kumar (1927 - 1999)



Born in 1927 at Vizianagaram, Sampath Kumar was the son of Ranganayakamma and Ramanujam. From his early days Sampath Kumar was exposed to folk dances of northern Andhra, since his father was a well-known performer. He was trained in Kuchipudi by Pasumarthi Krishna Murthy and Vedantam Prahlada Sarma. With a tall and impressive stature, Sampath Kumar was soon known for his roles in dance dramas, the most important ones being Banasura in *Usha Parinayam* and Siva in *Kumara Sambhavam*.

Sampath Kumar was also an able folk dancer. He specialized in performing the role of a fisherman and in the one-man show, running for nearly two hours, he toured the entire country. It is said that he had given 3000 performances of the fisherman dance alone.

Sampath started his maiden institution, Sri Geeta Nritya Kala Mandir at Vizianagaram (1955) and later established Sri Geetha Nritya Kalakshetram (1978) at Visakapatnam as its sister institution. Sampath was an able choreographer and teacher. He choreographed several yakshaganas including *Ksheerasagara Mathanam*, *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* and *Meghadootam* in the traditional Kuchipudi style. He also choreographed modern dance dramas such as *Eershya*, *Champaka* and an adaptation of the Biblical story of the prodigal son as *Duduku chinnavadu*.

Sampath won the best dance play award for his *Abhijnana Sakuntalam* at the National Sanskrit theatre competitions at Ujjain in 1961 and was given a *Swarna Kalasa* and a commendation.

Sampath Kumar was closely associated with the Andhra Pradesh Sangeetha Natak Akademi since its inception (1956) and

served as its joint secretary for a term. In that capacity he was actively concerned with the activities of Kuchipudi institutions. He was the co-convenor of the Nrityotsav (Dance Festival) held at Vizianagaram (September 1972) and made excellent arrangements. Along with it was held the first-ever seminar and festival of Toorpu Bhagavatham performances and Sampath Kumar organized it to the satisfaction of all concerned.

Sampath Kumar was a recipient of several awards and honours. He visited the Federal Republic of Germany's (1973) youth Festival and received the best performer award. He also visited Soviet Russia (1974), Mauritius (1990) and USA (1993) where he had given performances. Sampath was showered with titles such as Viswa Praja Nartakudu, Nritya Kaladhara, Nritya Mahadadhi and was honoured by the A.P. Nritya Akademi (1982). He also received the prestigious 'Kala Prapoorna' (an honorary doctorate) from Andhra University (1986), Soviet Land Nehru Award (1989), Telugu Association of North America's International Cultural Award. With his training in Kuchipudi under able masters and his carefully-nurtured folk dance traditions, which he synthesised in his practice, Sampath Kumar showed how a classical base would help a dancer's creative endeavour.

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XI

The Last Vestiges of Yakshagana

Introduction

With the passing away of Chinta Krishna Murthy, who retained the old glory of yakshagana for almost a quarter of a century, the yakshagana tradition at Kuchipudi had a set back. Immediately after his demise, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, until then its prime performer, took over the reins of the Venkatarama Natya Mandali. Strong pillars of yester years were either incapacitated or too old to continue the rigorous ordeal of yakshagana performances. Mahankali Satyanarayana, though initially continued in the Mandali, had to stop due to old age. Pasumarthi Kondala Rayudu and Pasumarthi Subrahmanya Sastry had withdrawn from active participation. Bhagavathula Lakshinarasimham also withdrew due to old age. With Darbha Venkateswarlu, the lone old-timer, Satyanarayana Sarma had to rebuild the Mandali. Mahankali Sriramulu, son of Satyanarayana was drafted to do the lead roles. Darbha was doing all the secondary male and female roles including that of Madhavi in Bhama kalapam. Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma, who has already proved his mettle in doing female roles continued in the Mandali doing secondary female roles. Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma was drafted to do the *uddhata* roles. P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, who was hitherto accompanying Chinta Krishna Murthy as the second singer took over Nattuvangam. Bhagavathula Satya Sundara Rama Sastry and Veera Raghavaiah now wielded the *tala*.

This composition of the team of individual talents, some of them not groomed to be yakshagana actors came into its own after many years of struggle. The old actors that remained in the Mandali were in small number with a wide experience in several

yakshaganas. The Mandali limited its performances only to Bhama kalapam and two yakshaganams - *Usha Parinayam* and *Vipranarayana* - the second one, a later inclusion.

Even when the Mandali had fifteen members, it was difficult to manage shows. Now the team was reduced to six or seven and doing full-fledged yakshaganas on the scale of the old ones had become impossible. Very slowly the Mandali began to crumble under its own weight. Only invitations to the three plays in their repertoire were honoured.

Occasionally new hope emerges in the form of Governmental help, lingers for a while and disappears. A strong and sustained effort is needed to re-establish the preeminence of the Kuchipudi yakshagana of the old times with greater creativity. The Government institutions of Culture must come forward to start a repertory of Kuchipudi yakshaganas so that the once prominent dramatic form is once again rejuvenated. The government of the new state of Andhra Pradesh seems to have been engaged in strengthening the Kuchipudi Kalakshetra. Let proper advice prevail to select relevant people to monitor the future of Kuchipudi traditions.

Bhagavathula Laxminarasimham (1908 - 1975)

Born in 1908 to Yagnanarayana and Ramayamma, Laxminarasimham occupies an important place in the Bhama kalapam history of Kuchipudi. It is common knowledge that Bhama kalapam thrived whenever there was a good Bhama *veshadhari*. After Vempati Venkatanarayana's demise, the mantle fell on his first disciple, Laxminarasimham. Not that there were no men in Kuchipudi donning female roles at that time. But most of them were drawn to the Yakshaganas and, as before, Bhama *vesham* was not the only option. It was at this crucial phase of Bhama kalapam's declining trajectory that Laxminarasimham came in to fill the lacuna. Thus he stands as a bridge between the old and the new.



Bhagavathula Laxminarasimham
as Satya bhama in *Bhama kalapam*

After having his early education from his father, Laxminarasimham came under the tutelage of Vempati Venkatanarayana to undergo special training in Bhama kalapam. He soon became adept in playing Bhama and was ably supported by Pasumarthi Viswanatham. After the demise of his guru, Vempati Venkatanarayana, Laxminarasimham stepped into his shoes to preserve the essence of the “Vempati *bani*” and for quite sometime, the sole champion in the field of Bhama kalapam performances. The occasion was momentous for the disciple when a Bhama kalapam performance was ordered on the occasion of the death anniversary celebrations of Vempati and the *sishya* was grateful to his late guru for having got this opportunity to prove his mettle on the commemoration day.

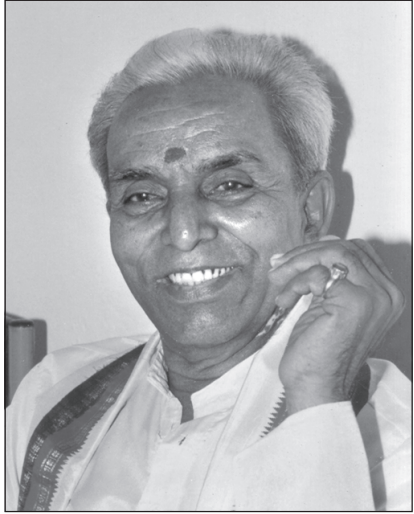
When Vedantam Parvateesam started Kuchipudi Kalakshetram in Kuchipudi, Laxminarasimham joined the school as a teacher and started teaching youngsters Bhama *vesham*. In fact, outside the ‘garidi-s’ of individual teachers at home, Laxminarasimham was perhaps the first teacher in a school to impart group training in Bhama kalapam.

A memorable episode in the life of Laxminarasimham took place when he had to perform Bhama kalapam in the presence of a scholar, Prof. Vissa Appa Rao, who came to Kuchipudi after his successful visit to Movva as a part of his study tour of the Andhra's classical arts. Laxminarasimham's performance as Bhama on that day stole the show. Equally commendable was the performance of Vedantam Parvateesam who donned the role of Sri Krishna. The entire performance showcased the best in Kuchipudi at that time.

Laxminarasimham continued to teach and perform for quite some time and even today he is remembered for having upheld Vempati Venkatanarayana's *bani*. He passed away in 1975.

P.V.G. Krishna Sarma (1929 - 2013)

One of the last disciples of 'yakshagana pitamaha', Chinta Venkataramaiah, Pasumarthi Venugopala Krishna Sarma was born at Kuchipudi on August 27, 1929 to Anjaneya Sarma and Annapurnamma. He had the good fortune of learning dance and music from three of the four Kuchipudi maestros - Chinta Venkataramaiah, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and Yeleswarapu



Seetharamanjaneyulu. He was also fortunate in learning 'nattuvangam' having worked under both Chinta Rama Murthy and Chinta Krishna Murthy and thus became equally felicitous both in yakshagana music and character portrayal. Even while learning his yakshagana preliminaries, he passed his S.S.L.C. examination and also obtained diplomas in Carnatic music and Kuchipudi dance.

Like all youngsters in Kuchipudi, Sarma started doing the roles of Prahlada, Lava, Kusa, Lohitasya and young Rukmangada very early in life. He gleefully recounted an incident while doing the role of Prahlada. There is a long passage for Prahlada with two poems and a long “dandakam” in praise of Lord Narasimha. Since he was still an young boy, the elder Chinta doubted the boy’s abilities to reproduce the entire passage on stage and so asked Krishna Sarma to say the first dialogue and told him that he would render the remaining poems and the “dandakam”. Sarma got angry and walked away. Chinta went to his house in the night and asked the boy why he was sulking like that. Sarma said that when someone recited his passages what was the need for him to play the role. Chinta smiled and asked the boy whether he could memorize the whole passage and reproduce it. Sarma said yes and the next day he produced the entire passage including the poems and the “dandakam” *verbatim* without a single mistake. Chinta, aged eighty at the time, took the seven - year old boy into his lap and blessed him.

From the child roles to secondary female roles is a natural process in Kuchipudi. Sarma donned all the secondary female roles like the Matanga women (*Harischarda*), Chitrarekha (*Usha Parinayam*) and the like. A slow climbing up into the major roles took a long time. Meanwhile Sarma took up to playing cymbals, keeping the ‘tala’, with Chinta Krishna Murthy doing the Sutradhara’s role. Many in Kuchipudi still feel that the combination of Chinta Krishna Murthy and P.V.G. Krishna Sarma to lead the yakshagana performance was the best in half a century.

The Kuchipudi performance history between 1940 and 1955 is a troubled one since traditional Kuchipudi performances lost their popularity and there was a dominance of stage plays. On the other hand *ekaharyas* and *dwharyas* dominated. Young Sarma, at the tender age of 14, started an association called Bala Tripura Sundari Natya Mandali and started performing solos and duets, his partner in the endeavour being Vedantam Parvateesam. Whenever they were free, the two-member team toured the

neighbouring villages and towns to give performances. After four years of struggle, in 1946, Sarma turned his association into a full-fledged theatre organization and started “contracting” important stage actors of the day in plays like *Harischandra*, *Sri Krishna Leelalu* and *Mohini Rukmangada*. Krishna Sarma used to select an important role for himself and “booked” important stage actors like Vemuri Gaggayya, Parupalli Subba Rao, Purnima, T.Rama Krishna Sastry and so on for other roles. Sarma himself would play Nakshatraka in *Harischandra*, Narada in *Sri Krishna Leelalu* and Rukmangada in *Mohini Rukmangada*.

Krishna Sarma re-joined the Venkatarama Natya Mandali and started taking an active part by first doing secondary roles and later by joining the singing group. Chinta Rama Murthy’s untimely death in 1951 left a void in the personnel to conduct the programmes. When Krishna Murthy chose to lead the yakshaganas with himself as the Sutradhara, Sarma joined him as the second singer. As music was Sarma’s *forte*, he was an automatic choice whenever and wherever Kuchipudi yakshaganas needed a musician.

Sarma’s long association with the training programmes in Kuchipudi, both on the musical side and on the actor-training side helped him professionally when, in 1957, he was selected as the Principal of the Kuchipudi school at Eluru, in which capacity he served the institution for three years. Meanwhile his efforts to start a dance school at Kuchipudi were intensified. He wanted the Kuchipudi school to be modelled on the lines of Kalakshetra, Adayar.

When All India Radio, Vijayawada undertook the prestigious job of recording six of the yakshaganas in their original traditional flavour, it drafted several luminaries like Bala Murali Krishna, Srirangam Gopalaratnam, Voleti Venkateswarlu and scores of other important musicians to do the roles. The only traditional artists from Kuchipudi were Chinta Krishna Murthy as the Sutradhara and Krishna Sarma as the singer.



PVG and Satyanarayana Sarma in
Bhama kalapam

Similarly, all the programmes of Venkatarama Natya Mandali featured both Chinta Krishna Murthy and P.V.G. Krishna Sarma as the leading pair. When Krishna Murthy passed away, the mantle of leading the troupe with “nattuvangam” fell on Krishna Sarma. He also played Madhavi to Satyanarayana Sarma’s Bhama. It was often felt that

Krishna Sarma’s Madhavi brought with her not only the humour, but also the music since recent Madhavi-s were bereft of music, which reflected only a partial view of the character.

Krishna Sarma became the Principal of the Siddhendra Kalakshetram at Kuchipudi in 1972, thus fulfilling his long standing desire to train students in the tradition of the old-timers, giving equal importance to dance and music. Krishna Sarma was honoured by the State and Central cultural organizations several times, the most prestigious ones being the state’s award for the best Kuchipudi guru and central Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1987). In 2012, the Central Akademi honoured him with “Tagore Akademi Ratna” (Tagore Fellow of the Akademi), a coveted honour.

Krishna Sarma was closely associated with the Departments of Dance all over the state. He taught courses or served on their academic bodies. When the Central Sangeet Natak



A group of Ramanatakam performers with P.V.G. Krishna Sarma (extreme right) as the *Sutradhara*

Akademi along with the Hyderabad Central University conducted a workshop on yakshagana, Sarma was the natural choice to be the director of the workshop and his production of an edited version of “Sasirekha Parinayam” was appreciated for its celebration of the old time glory.

In his long and eventful life, Sarma had trained several important dancers including Yamini Krishna Murthy, Raja-Radha Reddy, Vasanthalakshmi and Ramana Rao and Pasumarthi Vittal, his own son.

Krishna Sarma’s eventful life came to a close when he passed away after a brief illness in 2013 at Kuchipudi.

P.V.G. Krishna Sarma was an all-round genius and a true representative of the old school who combined music, *abhinaya* and dance that were once an integral part of the illustrious Kuchipudi tradition.

Vedantam Rattaiah Sarma (1943 - 1998)



Younger brother of ‘Bharata Kala Prapoorna’ Vedantam Raghavaiah, Rattaiah Sarma was born in Kuchipudi in 1943 to Vedantam Ramayya and Annapurnamma. He had his dance education from several Kuchipudi luminaries including Vedantam Parvateesam, Hari Punnaiah Sastry, Chinta Krishna Murthy, Mahankali Satyanarayana and in later years from Vempati Chinna Satyam. Groomed by his brother Raghavaiah, Rattaiah Sarma was

especially trained for *uddhata* roles in Kuchipudi yakshaganas, even though he donned children’s roles and the major female roles early in his life.

Rattaiah Sarma, with his well-built physique, his well-preserved stature, large eyes and expressive face was easily the best choice for *rakshasa* roles in Kuchipudi yakshaganas. After Mahankali Satyanarayana retired, Rattaiah Sarma just fitted into his shoes. He was an able performer, agile and active. He was especially remembered for his roles like Hiranya kasipa, Banasura, Kamsa, Bali Chakravarti and Viswamitra and acquitted himself well in all these characters.

Rattaiah Sarma had the unique opportunity to work both in the traditional yakshaganas and also in modern dance dramas directed by Vempati Chinna Satyam. With Chinna Satyam’s troupe he did Aakaasa Raju, Bhrigu Maharshi and Chola Raju, all in *Padmavati Srinivasa Kalyanam*, Daksha Prajapati in *Hara vilasam* and *tamasa* roles in dance dramas like *Siva Dhanurbhagam*, *Ksheerasagara Mathanam* and *Rukmini kalyanam*.

Rattaiah's ability to adjust to the changing situations and prove his mettle was an asset. The two roles he did with exceptional understanding and sensitivity are Hiranya kasipa and Banasura. In both of them his ability to show conflicting emotions brought him laurels from pundits and lay men alike. He was one of the best *tamasa* actors Kuchipudi yakshagana had and is in the line of Hari Chalapati and Mahankali Satyanarayana.

Rattaiah Sarma toured widely both an India and abroad. He visited U.S.A. and Soviet Russia and wherever he performed, he made a name for himself and his troupe. Rattaiah Sarma also acted in a couple of movies.



Rattaiah Sarma as Hiranya kasipa

Rattaiah, besides being a noteworthy performer, was also a versatile teacher. He was in the service of the Siddhendra Kalakshetram for a number of years and was engaged in its training programmes. No one in recent times taught the basics to his students as Rattaiah Sarma did. He was also acting principal of Siddhendra Kalakshetram in which capacity he choreographed several new yakshaganas and dance dramas, including "Prahlada Bhakta Vijayam", "Siddhendra Yogi" and "Girija Kalyanam". He acted as Taneesha in "Kuchipudi Sandarsanam", a T.V. serial depicting the history of Kuchipudi dance. For this role he received the best-actor award (Nandi competitions) from the government of Andhra Pradesh. He groomed his two sons in the art of Kuchipudi.

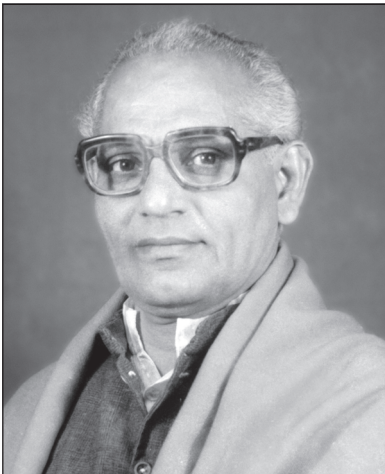


Rattaiah Sarma training youngsters

Rattaiah Sarma was honoured by several institutions and organizations including the Telugu and Kakatiya universities.

Rattaiah Sarma passed away on 2nd February, 1998 at Kuchipudi.

Mahankali Sriramulu Sarma (1930 - 2009)



Born to Mahankali Satyanarayana, the famous Kuchipudi dancer-actor of *tamasa* roles and Kamakshamma in 1930, Sriramulu had his early training from his father and later from Vedantam Parvateesam. He also underwent rigorous training in yakshagana performances from Chinta Krishna Murthy, the veteran yakshagana guru and musical training from

Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu. After successfully completing his training, he joined the Venkatrama Natya Mandali and grew into an ace dancer-actor.

With a fine physique and a pleasant demeanour, Sriramulu soon occupied the coveted position of the 'hero' in all Kuchipudi yakshaganas. He was Aniruddha in *Usha Parinayam*, Krishna and Arjuna in *Gayopakhyanam*, Harischandra in the yakshagana of the same name, Srirama in *Rama natakam* and Vipranarayana in *Vipranarayana charitra*. His mastery in dance and also in singing gave him an enviable place in the yakshaganas.

Sriramulu was not satisfied with these 'soft' (according to him) roles and started to do the *tamasa* roles such as Banasura. He also credited himself with such a variety of roles as Balarama in



Mahankali Sriramulu and Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma in *Usha parinayam*

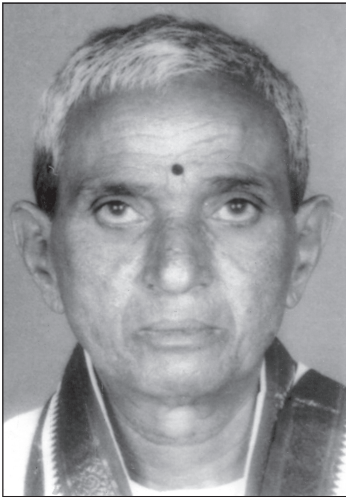
Sasirekha parinayam and as Sankara in *Usha parinayam*. He also mastered the art of the Sutradhara both in Bhama kalapam and Golla kalapam. As Madhavi in Bhama kalapam and as the Brahmin in Golla kalapam, he proved his worth as an all-rounder. He could successfully portray different *rasas* in these diverse roles - *sringara*, *bhakti*, *veera* and *lasya* in a way that he proved to be an actor of the old ilk.

That Sriramulu played several of these roles against the much-revered actor, Vedantam Sathyanarayana Sarma and proved his meritorious talent is by itself a creditworthy achievement. Their combination was the last simmering light of the Kuchipudi yakshagana. There was no role that Sriramulu did not play in the Kuchipudi repertoire and did not excel.

Sriramulu toured extensively as a member of both the Venkatarama Natyamandali and also of Vempati Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi Kalakshetra, both in India and abroad and brought laurels to himself, to the institutions he represented and to Kuchipudi art. He was also an accomplished teacher, having taught several upcoming artists of Kuchipudi.

Sriramulu, after a meritorious service to Kuchipudi for more than fifty years, passed away on 21st of July, 2009, leaving a void in the field of Kuchipudi yakshagana art.

Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma (b. 1942)



The youngest of the old guard, Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma was born in 1942 to Arundhati and Viswanatham. He had his dance training from Chinta Krishna Murthy. After his successful training he was groomed into Venkatarama Natya Mandali and did all the child roles in the yakshaganas. He soon matured into doing secondary female roles like Madhavi in *Bhama kalapam* and Chitrarekha in *Usha Parinayam*.

Rattaiah Sarma was known for his mastery of the solo dance items within the Kuchipudi kalapa format such as the “Dasavatara”, “Prahlada” and “Manduka

Sabdam” and the *tarangams*. In his younger days when Venkatarama Natya Mandali was touring extensively, his individual items received a grand reception. This was so especially in the Mandali’s South Indian tour in 1954. The stalwarts of the Madras dance world were excited by his “Balagopala tarangam” followed by the plate and vessel dance. As a dancer who mastered the *laya* patterns and *jatis* of Kuchipudi, it is a treat to see his fast movements performing intricate *jatis* with ease.



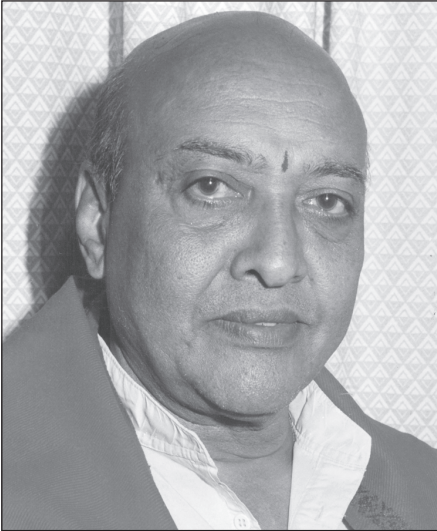
Rattaiah Sarma’s performance as Chित्रarekha in *Usha Parinayam*

is noteworthy for his agility and presence of mind. With Sathyanarayana Sarma as Usha and Rattaiah Sarma as Chित्रarekha the scenes they portrayed regarding a lover who appeared in Usha’s dream have always judiciously combined *sringara* and *hasya*.

Rattaiah Sarma has also performed in the maiden roles of Usha and Bhama and was hailed as an able practitioner of female impersonation. As the lone survivor of the old tradition, Rattaiah is always available to scholars and students to explicate the nuances of the intricate *abhinaya* patterns in Kuchipudi. He received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award for his services to Kuchipudi dance in 2009 and is also a recipient of honours from other institutions including the Telugu University and the Siddhendra Kalakshetram.

XII

Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma (1935 - 2012) and the Art of Female Impersonation



An evening on a dimly-lit improvised open stage during a festival of a village goddess. Thousands of rural devotees looking at the performing deity with awe-some wonder. A late night performance in a small town, audience loudly appreciating the dancing damsel. A metropolis and a wonderfully elegant stage with elitist audiences glued to their seats. Alien audiences, without the

knowledge of what is happening on the stage, but unbelievably wonderstruck at the "happening " itself! Young and old, innocent and initiated, rural and urban - so wide and large is his clientele. Everyone is over-powered by the sheer empathy of experience and, later, by the haunting memories of aesthetic excellence.

This exceptional performance skill challenging all norms of credibility is the main stay of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma's virtuosity of impersonating women, a virtuosity that beguiles both men and women. For sixty years he toured places, up and down in the length and breadth of India and abroad and wherever he performed he stole the hearts of the spectators and brought Kuchipudi national honour and international recognition. Two

Satyams - Vempati Chinna Satyam and Vedantam Satyam - were singularly responsible for projecting the Kuchipudi dance form far and wide on the national and international horizon in recent years ; Vempati by widening and modifying the performance structure of the traditional format and Vedantam by chiselling each bit of the performance to its natural perfection and bringing each character he portrayed closer to the day-today experience of the common people.

Born into a traditional family of performers in Kuchipudi, in the renowned actors' village, Vedantam Satyam (as he is popularly called) had been both fortunate and also unfortunate at the same time. He had a long and rich tradition that conditioned him into dance; but it could not provide him with great opportunities. He had to strive against odds to become what he was. Born on September 9, 1935 Satyam was initiated into dance at a young age. His parents - Venkataratnam and Subbamma naturally desired him to be a dancer, as was the custom among all Brahmin families in Kuchipudi at that time. Satyam did not have much of formal education, since he had to devote his time for dance and music. But a great tradition was behind him. The first known ancestor of the Vedantam family, one Chalamayya led a small troupe of performers to Kerala and presented Bhama kalapam before the King of Thiruvananthapuram. As the story goes, the king was so pleased by the performance that he shared his throne with Chalamayya and honoured him profusely.

Satyam started learning his alphabets in dance from his own elder brother, Prahlada Sarma, a well-known dancer and an efficient teacher. A strict disciplinarian and a hard taskmaster, Prahlada Sarma spared no rod in putting Satyam in the right direction. Satyam's only solace was his mother's loving protection. Satyam gratefully acknowledged that, but for his brother's exacting supervision¹, he would not have learnt music under the masterly care of Yeleswarapu Seetharamanjaneyulu, a veteran teacher, since the Kuchipudi art depends on the mastery of the twin arts of music and dance together.

Expecting a desirable mastery on two distinct arts is perhaps too heavy a burden on the young shoulders of the Kuchipudi boys, but tradition and practicality demanded that they must be proficient in both singing and dancing. In the days when dancers do not feel the need to learn the language of the performance text, let alone its meaning, Satyam stands as a unique actor by singing all the lyrics in the text and doing *abhinaya* to them. In fact, his musical sense enriched his character portrayal by adding an emotive quality to it.

Even while attending his dance and music classes, Satyam joined the ranks of the other young boys of Kuchipudi Brahmin families, as a child artist. He joined Pasumarti Kondalarayudu's troupe in which his brother acted all the major female roles. Satyam was given such child roles as Lohitasya in *Harischandra*, Lava in *Rama natakam* and young Rukmangada in *Mohini Rukmangada*. The initial experience in the first few years was not encouraging. He was also frustrated, oscillating between journeys on foot and practising adavus while at home. He somehow felt that remaining a dancer had no future since there were several youngsters who were trained and eager to perform the major roles and not enough opportunities coming their way. So his brother sent him to the nearby district town, Machilipatnam to learn music under the tutelage of Sishta Brahmaiah Sastry, a vocalist and violinist of repute. Two years of learning music made him confident and he started appreciating the dance music of his ancestral profession.

Satyam did not lose track of the performances at his village. By fourteen, he has learnt much of the *Bhama vesham* from his brother but the elders felt that he was not yet ripe for a public performance of such a challenging role. He continued to perform secondary roles like the Matanga Kanyas or Satyakeerti, the minister in *Harischandra*. As a Matanga Kanya he would dance to a couple of *javalis* or in the other small roles he would do a *tarangam* or a *javali* or at the most the '*Dasavatara*' *sabdam* and that was all!² He acted as a maid to his brother's Usha in *Usha Parinayam*. He did the roles of Chitrarekha, Chandravadana, etc.

One day, when he was accompanying his uncle, the illustrious Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, the pioneer of 'solo' dances in Kuchipudi, during one his sojourns to a neighbouring village, Satyam felt that somebody was coming by his side. It was dusk and he was a little puzzled first and later afraid. His uncle was hurrying up because it was getting dark. Satyam was in low spirits, as he was not being given a chance to show his talent. All of a sudden, the brooding boy became alert as someone patted him on the shoulder. He looked back and found a Sanyasi, smiling at him. "You are worried, aren't you? You will have better opportunities by your nineteenth year and you will carry the Kuchipudi mantle far and wide³", he said.

Young Satyam looked askance. When he was about to enquire further about his future, the Sanyasi disappeared. Satyam believed that it was Siddhendra yogi himself that had appeared to him to console his depressing wits and enthuse him. Whoever it might be, Satyam started getting his rightful opportunities slowly.

In 1954 came such an opportunity when a Kuchipudi dance drama was invited to New Delhi for a performance of *Usha Parinayam* at Sapru House. Satyam was given the role of Parvati in that production and Mahankali Sriramulu, who played all the leading male roles by the side of Satyam and a conscientious actor-dancer, took the role of Siva. The troupe could fortunately procure a Kailasa setting before which Siva and Parvati danced! He also performed a Siva stotram "Samba Sadasiva" on that occasion. The production, for the first time, brought the Kuchipudi tradition into limelight in the country's capital and Satyam was recognized as a talented young dancer-actor.

On their return to the village with this initial success, two important incidents happened. On the basis of the experience at New Delhi, elders felt that Kuchipudi yakshagana performances outside the state must hereafter be represented by the best performers of the village, irrespective of the troupe he belonged. So the two existing groups (called 'Melams')- the Chinta Vari

Melam' and Pasumarti vari Melam, got united. Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, Pasumarti Kondalarayudu and Satyam of the Pasumarti Troupe and Chinta Rama Murthy, Chinta Krishna Murthy, Hari Chalapathi, Bokka Seetharamaiah, Darbha Venkataswarlu and others of the Chinta troupe joined hands and since then was known as Chinta vari Melam. The second occurrence in the life of Satyam at this time was his marriage. He married Pasumarti Kondalarayudu's daughter, which perhaps gave him a status in the troupe.

The turning point in his life came at this opportune time. The troupe was booked for a performance of *Usha Parinayam* in a neighbouring village, Peda Muktevi, a village of landlords. With the success at Delhi haunting, Kondalarayudu wanted Satyam to do the role of Usha and it was accepted. Satyam was both happy and agitated. He was nervous but the play went off very well. The whole village stood in applause. Narra Venkataratnam, a rich landlord of the village and later a life-long friend and benefactor, honoured Satyam for his 'superb' portrayal of the role. Satyam never looked back. He was just twenty years old.

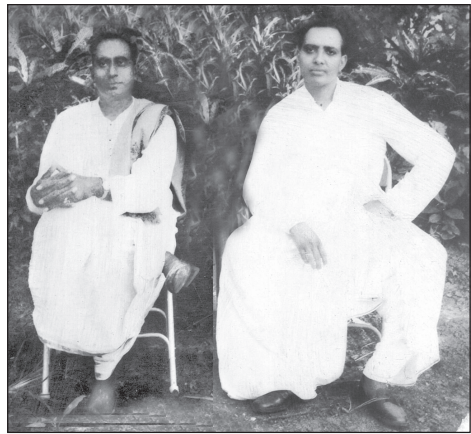


Satyam and the Venkatarama Natya Mandali

The controversy whether Kuchipudi was classical or not had just been solved with all the Kuchipudi stalwarts joining together to show how 'sastric' it is. After the approval of the 'pundits', a National Dance Festival was conducted at Hyderabad in 1964. It was in a way a celebration of glory under the auspices of the State Sangeet Natak Akademi (and the president of the Festival was Vedantam Raghavaiah), with Balasaraswathi, Shambhu Maharaj and the Jhaveri Sisters as participants. In par with them was Satyam whose performance of Usha was exemplary. He was now a pan-Indian celebrity.

Meanwhile, attempts were being made vigorously to gain for Kuchipudi dance the recognition of a classical dance art. It was just then that the Chinta vari Melam was rechristened as Venkatarama Natya Mandali after the originator of the yakshagana tradition in Kuchipudi, Chinta Venkataramaiah. His son, Chinta Rama Murthy took over as the artistic head of the troupe and, on his early demise, Chinta Krishna Murthy was made the President and the Director of the troupe. Satyam was the chief actor.

Satyam considered Krishna Murthy his second Guru (the first one being his elder brother, Prahlada Sarma). Chinta Krishna Murthy, a worthy actor and a worthier Sutradhara, consolidated the gains already won by the individual members. He groomed Satyam as a heroine of this troupe, polishing the rough edges, which made Satyam more graceful and more lovable. He also made adjustments in the performance strategies. The music got



Chinta Krishna Murthy and
Satyanarayana Sarma

better synchronized; humour more sophisticated and urbane and he geared the performances as well- knit, disciplined exercises in creativity. Satyam gained confidence over years and started getting recognition, with awards, prizes and honours pouring in.

Honours and Titles

Satyam received the Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1961, when he was hardly twenty-six. He was one of the youngest, when he got the award. He was so widely popular for his unique perfection in the rare art of female impersonation, especially in the area of a classical art that he was selected a Fellow of the Akademi in 1968.

Satyam received the “Padma” award in 1970. The entire nation paid him tributes for his excellence in *abhinaya*, especially



Satyam receiving the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award from
Dr. Rajendra Prasad

while impersonating a woman. He was honoured with several state awards. Many Chief Ministers cancelled their pressing engagements to attend his performances. While they were honouring him, there was always a bashful smile, not on the face



Satyam receiving 'Padmasri' award from President V.V. Giri

of the recipient Satyam, but on the faces of the dignitaries, reminding one of bridegrooms eager to marry but hesitant to touch the bride. Satyam received the prestigious Kalidas Samman award in 1988 and the other luminaries who received the same award along with him are M.F. Hussain, the celebrated painter and P.L.Deshpande, the doyen of contemporary Marathi Drama. He was awarded an honorary D.Litt. degree by the Telugu University in 1996. In 2005 Sangeet Natak Akademi honoured him along with other stalwarts in their "Nritya Nidhi" programme. Well-respected journalists praised his art and the man equally eloquently. A.S Raman hailed him as "the Dancer's Dancer", while Subbudu praised, "his exalting artistic capacity" and said that "VSS is one of the few left from the old world, who showcase their acting prowess".

The Venkatarama Natyamandali, by now, has become synonymous with the best professional talent in Kuchipudi. In 1956, when Shanti Dev Ghosh of Shanti Niketan came to visit Kuchipudi, the Chinta troupe presented a memorable performance

of *Usha Parinayam* - this time, Satyam as Usha, his brother Prahlada Sarma as Chitrarekha and Pasumarti Rattaiah as Chandravadana! The entire village was at the Ranga Mantapa of Bala Tripura Sundari Temple. The performance revealed to the villagers, perhaps for the first time in recent years, how noble and breath-taking their art was. The dominant *rasas* of *sringara* and *veera*, in all their manifestations of *alamkara*, *dhwani* and *abhinaya* were evoked in the performance and Satyam was since that day identified with the role of 'Usha' so much that people in the village can easily recognize him if referred to as 'Usha Satyam'.

Other important Roles

If 'Usha' brought him initial fame, it was with Satyabhama in *Bhama kalapam* that Satyam was often identified. It is interesting to hear from him that within the state people liked his Usha and outside the state it was "Bhama". But he says he likes both the characters and is comfortable with both.

The other roles that he performed with élan are Deva Devi in *Vipra Narayana*, Mohini in *Mohini Rukmangada*, Sasirekha in *Sasirekha Parinayam* and Gollabhama in *Golla Kalapam*.

These yakshaganas and kalapas are the hallmark of a Kuchipudi artist's genius. Satyam did not do the roles of Sita in *Rama natakam* and Chandramati in *Harischandra*. He says that these two characters are too humble and subservient. But each of the other roles is a dominant one and reflects one specific aspect of feminine ethos. Bhama is vain, envious, jealous and proud. However, she has been the darling heroine of the Telugu people, who replaced docile Radha with this authoritative, valorous and undaunting Satyabhama. There are half a dozen epic narratives in the *Kavya* literature based on her story and has been immortalized in *prabandhas* like *Parijathapaharanam*. Similarly, there is a sizeable bulk of writings in the yakshagana literature, the most important one being *Narayana Teertha's yakshagana, Parijathapaharanam* with that name. In a way, the Telugu people

took her as an idealization of female perfection and a representative of the strong, self-willed housewife. After all, which one would not like to see a wife pine for her husband, after she was rude to him?

The Kuchipudi artists also fondly cherish the role of Bhama. No other character in Kuchipudi repertoire stands as a challenge to the actor's multi- chartered efficiency as Bhama is. As is often pointed out, scope for exhibiting all facets of *sringara abhinaya* are aplenty in the role, especially in depicting the *ashta vidha nayikas*. It is a classic role. Satyam's physical stature (he was once slim) and his portly appearance do not come in the way of his portrayal of the character. When once he completes his make-up and comes into his character, his external appearance matters little! Indrani Rahman, a Kuchipudi dancer of high repute, ranks Satyam on the level of " the great Kabuki Specialists" and " Mei - Fan, the famed actor - dancer and scholar of China who died in 1943."⁴

While Bhama is a *swaadheena patika*, Usha is a *mugdha*, an innocent girl on the threshold of youth, slowly getting knowledgeable about the tantrums of love. She sees a handsome young prince in her dreams and is lost to him. She pines for him and finally braves her father, who is against the young man, Aniruddha and her father Sri Krishna. Satyam loved this role when he was young, but later he preferred the role of Bhama, who is a *proudha*.

Satyam is popular for two other roles -Deva Devi in *Vipra Narayana* and Mohini in *Mohini Rukmangada*. The characters are enticing; one is divine, the other is human; but their lives have the same kind of a graph; jealous and angry; wooing men so that they fall prey to their beauty, but in the end, repentant. Satyam's female roles, with their uncanny smiles and the angular looks won the hearts of every spectator even after he put on a few more calories. He is absolutely fantastic and is a heart-throb to many a woman.

Foreign Tours

Satyam toured France in 1985 and had performances in Paris to packed audiences. The most memorable trip Abroad was to the US in 1986, when Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam accompanied him and did Nattuvangam. The Festival of India in the US invited Satyam who toured the country for 40 days giving performances at various centres including New York, Washington, Chicago and California. American audiences were extremely recipient of Satyam's female impersonation if reviews of the day are an indication.

How did Satyam make these character portrayals so absorbing ? And how did he make this unnatural female impersonation look so natural?

Satyam's answers to these questions look simple and straightforward, but are lessons that he learnt after long years of involved deliberations within himself. He says that he internalizes the characters and approximates the externalities as near to reality as possible.

Satyam and the art of female impersonation

Internalization : Key to Impersonation

The internalization process which is common in theatre has wider implications in female impersonation. As Satyam says it happens partly due to traditional orientation and partly to the artiste's own characterization process. There is a strong tradition of men taking up the roles of women in the Kuchipudi theatre. They are trained to don the role of Bhama. That is the custom which was said to have been based on a vow given by the village elders of 15th century to their legendary ancestor, Siddhendra Yogi, "the Bharatamuni of Kuchipudi". It was practised by generations of elders. Hari Chalamayya, Vempati Venkatanarayana, Vedantam Raghavaiah, Prahlada Sarma, Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma - the list runs into pages. That everyone born in the land must at least

once dance in the role of Bhama has been in vogue till recently. And many of them gained fame as "Bhamas," which explains that female impersonation is a part of a strong tradition which the male Kuchipudi artiste imbibes.

Again, within the framework of this training, necessary theoretical inputs further strengthen the artiste's approach to impersonation. The Nayaka-Nayika *adhyayas* of Natya Sastra, of *Rasamanjari*, and of *Abhinaya Darpana* supplied them. The Nayaka-Nayika *bhedas*, the *abhinaya* aspects of *sringara* and their expressive modalities are part of the learner's early curriculum. Simultaneously, they were also to learn the *pancha kavyas* which served as *lakshyas* to the *lakshanas* of the sastraic texts. Besides, elder actors donning the role became role models. So every household knew about the 'greats' in this art of female impersonation. Each practising lad was also told why they were great. This always stayed as an inspiration and a direction.

When Satyam took up the roles in fifties and started performing all over the country, the demands on him were formidable. He was to please the audiences who were not aware of the tradition. So he was made to go through a greater internalizing process to enable him to be more convincing. Chinta Krishna Murthy, who had excellent literary prowess, painstakingly explained the nuances in the characters, discussing with him the nature and functionality of each one of the *sringara* aspects of the text. Satyam practised them at home. Before every performance, Satyam would spend two and a half hours to three hours for the make up of a role. All this time he devoted his time to think of the role and to act it out mentally, detailing every stance, every movement, every smile!

Sattvikabhinaya

Satyam's popularity as a performer was mainly due to his unparalleled *sattvikabhinaya*. His interpretation of a role largely depends on carefully tracing out a graph of emotional visciditudes that are found in the character and approximating them and relating

them to common experience. By realistically interpreting the character's inner psyche he is touching at the roots of our sensibilities. The entire spectrum of *sringara*, the eight 'hues' of love, amuse, tickle and taunt, 'overpower' every human being - young or old and depicting these multiple manifestations in as realistically viable a way as possible is Satyam's contribution to familiarize a mythical character to a modern audience. Further, Satyam infested each role with the whole gamut of emotions, each one quickly succeeding the other. Each part of his face responds to this quick emotional transference - the eyes, the cheeks, the frown, the lips. He is angry, playful, sorrowful, expectant, dreaming by turns - moving from one mood to the other almost in a split second. This exposition of a bundle of intricate psychic states, conflicting all the time, puts Satyam on a high tension point all through the performance and by constant practice achieved perfection. Bhama's letter to her Lord, Krishna, is a case in point. Squatting quietly on the floor, through sheer mudras and changing *bhavas* on her volatile face, delivering a *churnika*, she evokes *karuna* and *sringara*, two interdependent *rasas* transforming the common spectator's experience from that of an identifiable individual reality to that of a universal generality.

External Identity

The externalizing process is equally creative. *Aharya* in the case of female impersonation is very vital. Satyam concentrated vigorously on two other counts as well; the *angika* and the *vacika* aspects of women. He said that he carefully observed how a woman walked, talked, showed anger, love, indifference, etc. and he tried to incorporate such movements in his character delineation. While all his heroine roles belong to royalty or to divinity or to a specified class of importance, he approximates the manners, mannerisms, voice rhythms and perfect intoning of the words that befit the required character. This needed great practice and, in the early years, each performance was like a practising session. Another important contributing factor in female impersonation is the way

in which dialogue is enunciated. For a female role, *vacika* must be soft and low and yet audible. Satyam consciously developed the female speech rhythms. So is the case with gestures. The female impersonator must first of all learn to use his hands delicately. Broad gestures have no place.

Satyam is also conscious of the process of female impersonation. The three-hour making-up each time he does a female role is like an operation, peeling out the external demeanour and grafting a new soul into it. The male actor donning a female role is like a "twice-born Brahmin". An actor takes up the role of another person and that is being born as another person. But in this case he is not only taking another role; he, being a man, takes up the role of a woman, thus re-born again.

The external process of female impersonation also helps the internalization process. It starts with Guru-vandana. He sits before a mirror and visualizes the female form he is going to put on. He slowly gets into the act of make-up. In order to feel the femininity, he puts on the bodice, applies facial make-up and the hair-do. Then wears the jacket after which the necessary ornaments are properly adorned. There are ornaments not only around the neck, but to the hands, shoulders, fingers, etc. Then the braid. The braid has a long history in Kuchipudi dance; it is the very symbol of female pride. Did not Satyabhama chide her husband with it ? Does not the actor throw it on the half-curtain to challenge any contenders in the mastery of the art ? Then come the ornaments and decorations on the braid - the Surya, the Chandra, the Nakshatras and so on. Then he wears a sari and the ornaments that are worn on the sari, like the *vaddanam*, bedecked golden waist belt and other worthy ornaments. All this while, he broods over the character and how each one of these external manifestations lead up to reveal character.

Satyam has been identified with the female roles of Kuchipudi repertoire but he had had an opportunity to play male roles as well - only on two occasions. The first one was in

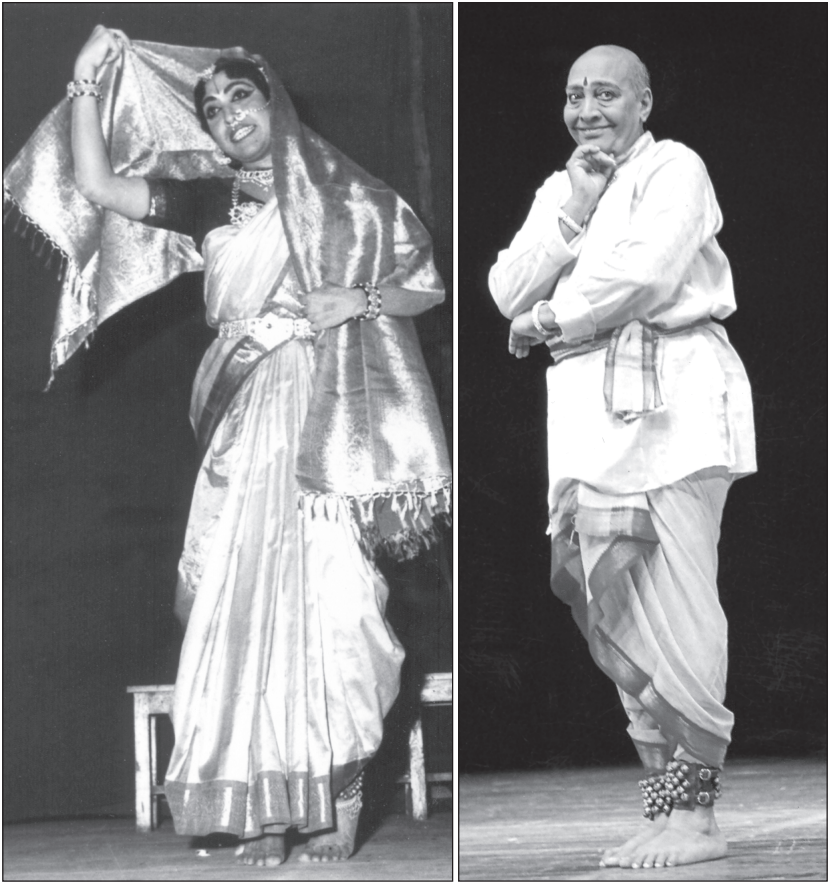


B. Saroja Devi as Parvati and
Satyanarayana Sarma as Manmadha in 'Rahasyam'

Kheerasagara Mathanam. This was done at the instance of Banda. Satyam played the role of Vishnu and Yamini Krishna Murthy, the well-known Kuchipudi danseuse was Mohini. The second occasion was in a movie 'Rahasyam', directed by Vedantam Raghavaiah. The movie contained a Kuchipudi ballet, 'Girija Kalyanam'. Satyam played the role of Manmadha and Korada Narasimha Rao was Shiva.

As Satyam humbly said, he would undertake this internal journey every time he performed and wherever he performed. He never distinguished between a major show before "big" people and an ordinary show in a remote village. For him a show is a show. Each time, he felt it was a fresh portrayal and a maiden performance.

As a man Satyam was very unassuming, sometimes even cold. But the unsatiated artiste in him yet strove to continue his mission to teach youngsters the art of female impersonation and its intricacies. As art lovers sadly realize, 'male dancers' is a diminishing tribe. And the male dancer impersonating a woman is almost an extinct species.



Satyanarayana Sarma in a performance (left); in a lec-dem (right)

Satyam's last days were spent in peaceful reminiscences of his long and eventful life. Interviews from researchers, both from India and abroad, were almost a daily routine and Satyam shared his experiences with the young scholars, thus passing on the inimitable expertise in an almost extinct species called 'female impersonation'.

Satyam passed away on the 15th of November 2012 and left a void in a rare but fascinating and aesthetically satisfying vocation in the history of Kuchipudi dance.

XIII

Three Indefatigable Crusaders

Introduction

In the olden days the Kuchipudi performing groups were patronized by rajahs, zamindars and wealthy landlords. Dance lovers were always in the forefront to sponsor plays, sometimes continuously for several months. While this was traditional patronage extended to performing groups, the changed patterns of patronage demanded more artist-specific approach or art-form-specific approach to reach new audiences, emerging due to socio-cultural changes. This needed someone to speak for the artists and the art form which introduces both in a right perspective. By temperament, public relations was not Kuchipudi artists' strong asset. And the need for an art form or an artist to outreach the new audiences seemed imminent.

Three important persons stand out in the recent 20th c. history of Kuchipudi for their selfless service for the promotion of Kuchipudi - for taking it to people who never had an occasion to know about it, for talking about it in a knowledgeable way or create a platform which provides such knowledge and finally bringing Kuchipudi dance art to wider Telugu and non-Telugu audiences. They served as the ambassadors of Kuchipudi, self-appointed in a way, because of their sheer love for the art. For the wider acceptance of the form throughout India they served as catalysts, often risking personal, familial and professional inconveniences.

The first among them is Ayyanki Thandava Krishna. A post-graduate in Telugu literature, Thandava Krishna was the son of Ayyanki Venkataramanaiah, the doyen of the Library movement

in Andhra. He learnt dance under Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, served as a lecturer for sometime and left his job to be a dancer and, in a way, an impressario. He was responsible for promoting the inimitable *abhinaya sampradaya* of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry not only in the Andhra region and the entire Madras state but also in the then Hyderabad state. He and Vedantam Jagannadha Sarma formed into a team with the guru as the conductor of the programme. Sastry also demonstrated some rare *padams*. The team met Uday Shankar who saw the performance and was so immensely pleased that he asked them to come to Almora centre to teach. The team went up to Pune to demonstrate and received unprecedented reception. Thandava Krishna also authored several articles on aspects of Kuchipudi and a book on South Indian dance traditions, still unpublished.

The second one is Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, a reputed stage actor and later producer of Drama at All India Radio, Vijayawada. By profession he was a practising lawyer at Eluru in West Godavari, but left it to devote himself completely to theatre. Thoroughly knowledgeable about the performance traditions of Andhra, Banda became a member of the central Sangeet Natak Akademi. When the central government started a cultural exchange programme within the country, it selected Kuchipudi's Venkatarama Natya Mandali and entrusted the job to the state Akademi. On the advice of the Central Akademi, Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao was appointed Manager of the team and Chinta Krishna Murthy as the artistic head. The team travelled to Madras, Thanjavur, Coimbatore and back again to Madras, giving Bhamakalapam and yakshagana performances. The team's visit to Madras and other Southern cities was the first great victory of Kuchipudi outside the Andhra region. While Thandava Krishna's work was with a single guru and his artistic excellence, Banda's was with the genre of yakshagana and the kalapam and the team that best represented the genres. He was also instrumental in starting the Siddhendra Kalakshetram at Kuchipudi.

The third person, G.M.Sharma, might not have the artistic

qualifications of the other two, but a greater zeal, willingness and devotion for propagating all genres of Kuchipudi and showcase them, in several North Indian, non-Telugu cities the best of Kuchipudi, either solo or group, yakshaganas or dance dramas.

If Kuchipudi is popular in the entire northern belt, from Kolkata to Mumbai, it is largely due to Sharma's initiative and his well-thought out Kuchipudi Mahotsavs. Inspired initially by Vempati Chinna Satyam's performances, Sharma embarked upon festivals of Kuchipudi dance wherever he was posted as an officer in the central government's offices. He brought an unprecedented focus on the art by showcasing the performances of the old masters as well as the best among the youngsters. He also founded an organization called Kuchipudi Kala Kendra at Mumbai which started Kuchipudi training centres at four different parts of the city. He has also been the publisher of a prestigious journal, *Nartanam*, a quarterly journal of the classical dance forms of India for twelve years.

The tenacity of these people and all those who helped them and the love they have had for Kuchipudi should be remembered by all lovers and practitioners of Kuchipudi.

Ayyanki Thandava Krishna (1915 - 1991)



Thandava Krishna, born as Venkata Krishna Murthy, to Ayyanki Venkataramanaiah, the man who spearheaded the Library movement in Andhra and Ranganayakamma in 1915, was the first outsider who had recognised the artistic potentialities of Kuchipudi dance and made it his life's ambition to study it, research into it, write

extensively on it and propagate it. There were one or two outsiders who studied Kuchipudi at the same time and had helped it in other ways to be recognised, but Thandava Krishna took it upon his shoulders that more than his own dance career, the need was to make people know about its heritage. He also felt that one of the reasons why Kuchipudi was not known outside was that the artists themselves could not explain the nuances and there was no one else who could interpret it for them. He felt the rapturous reception Kuchipudi would get if only knowledgeable people could explicate the thematic and technical details.

Thandava Krishna's father, Venkataramanaiah, besides being the leader of the library movement, was also a cultural leader. He edited a journal, *Grandhalaya Sarvasvam* in which articles on Indian cultural renaissance were published and Thandava Krishna was their first reader. Besides, Venkataramanaiah's house in Vijayawada was the very centre of cultural rejuvenation for several national leaders, poets and writers often visited the family. It was but natural that Thandava Krishna was attracted towards Telugu literature and arts very early in life.

Thandava Krishna took his Masters degree in Telugu Literature and started his career as a teacher. But his interest in dance took him to Kuchipudi. He studied under Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry for four years and became adept in *abhinaya*. He also studied Kathakali with Kunju Kurup of Malabar and was trained in Bharatanatyam by no less a guru than Meenakshisundaram Pillai.

Meanwhile the S.R.R & C.V.R College was started in Vijayawada and Thandava Krishna joined the institution as a lecturer. But after a few years, he left the job to devote himself completely to Kuchipudi dance. He went back to his guru and requested him to embark upon new choreographies for one or two dancers. Thandava Krishna and the guru's son, Jagannadha Sarma were drafted into doing solos and duets. Guru Laxminarayana Sastry was the leader. He would demonstrate intricate *abhinaya*

patterns for a *padam* or *javali* and will do nattuvangam for the duo's dance pieces.

The three-some toured the entire state with dance numbers like “Siva Thandavam”, “Radhakrishna Pranayam”, “Lasya Nrityam” and “Sabda Nrityam”. Thandava Krishna himself choreographed some numbers with social themes. Wherever they performed, people showered praises on the new concept. At each one of the shows, Thandava Krishna would explain the nature of each dance number, thereby not only educating the public but also leading them to have a greater sense of appreciation. He had become such an impresario that a respected daily from Hyderabad, *Golconda Patrika* (dated 6.10.1941) editorially described Thandava Krishna, who, in spite of being proficient in all the South Indian dance forms, chose to work for the betterment of Kuchipudi, as “Andhra's cultural ambassador” who proclaimed wherever he went that “Kuchipudi dance was no less in its richness than any other form”. The editor of the newspaper, Suravaram Pratapa Reddy, a renowned authority on Andhra history and culture, further said that the entire responsibility of attaining recognition to the art form rested with Thandava Krishna¹.

It was during this trip to Hyderabad state that Thandava Krishna was honoured by Nawab Zahiruddin Khan Bahadur at Basheer Bagh palace with the title “Thandava”, from which time onwards he was popularly called “Thandava Krishna”. From Hyderabad the team went to Pune and performed at the Andhra club. On their way back they again stayed at Hyderabad and gave performances. Uday Shankar, who happened to be in Hyderabad showed interest in seeing Sastriji's *abhinaya*. Thandava Krishna arranged a performance of Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's Bhamakalapam at Sagar Talkies on January 13, 1942 and Uday Shankar was simply thrilled and said that he never saw such superb *abhinaya* and asked both the guru and the sishya to visit his Almora school and if possible teach at his institute.

Vedantam's Bhamakalapam performance witnessed by Uday Shankar was fortunately preserved for us in a review

published in the daily *Andhra Patrika* dated January 13, 1942². The reviewer was Komanduri Venkatacharyulu, who extolled the performance of the sixty year old guru. He said what astonished Uday Shankar was that when Sastryji came on to the stage, clad in a silk sari, with all the seven-day jewels bedecked appropriately, he looked just a 25-year old royal lady and he stole the entire show with his *hasta* and *netra abhinaya*.

The programme was strictly to an invited audience and the press. Those that were present included stalwarts like Madapati Hanumantha Rao, Suravaram Pratapa Reddy, Seetha Kumari, Gadepalli Prakasa Rao and Vakil N.K.Rao. Uday Shankar, at the end of the programme congratulated Vedantam for his inimitable *abhinaya* performance and thanked Thandava Krishna and Gadepalli Prakasa Rao who gave him this rare privilege.

Thandava Krishna had striven to propagate this art continuously, not only through his own and his guru's performances, but, after his guru's demise, undertook to research into the ancient glory of the art form. On the basis of his research he wrote several articles on the history and technique of Kuchipudi dance including on yakshagana, on Bhama kalapam and on the diverse genres performed by the Kuchipudi artists. His major work was an unpublished book on the history and technique of the South Indian Dance. He wrote a book in English entitled *Kuchipudi*

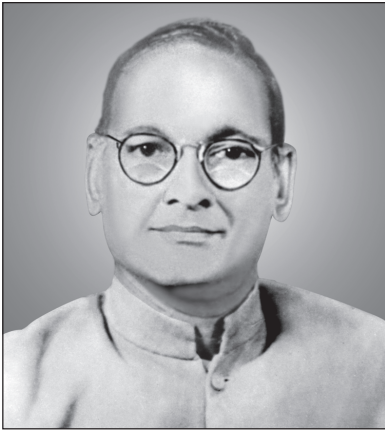


Thandava Krishna (extreme left) closely observing make-up details of Kuchipudi actors. At the extreme right is Vedantam Raghavaiah

Bharatam. Under a government of India fellowship, Thandava Krishna worked on a research project on the Kuchipudi and Karnataka yakshaganas. He also presented research papers at the All-India Oriental conference sessions.

Thandava Krishna was honoured by several institutions all over the country. He was honoured by the Andhra Pradesh Nritya Akademi with a special membership (1982). After a long and eventful life during which time he was loved by the Kuchipudi artists and respected by old lovers of Kuchipudi dance, Thandava Krishna passed way in 1991.

Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao (1907 - 1968)



Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, noted stage actor, founder of a well-known theatre association, Prabhat Theatres, producer of plays at All India Radio, Vijayawada, reputed cinema actor, founder of the first-ever acting school in Andhra, was by profession a lawyer who left his job to be a full time actor. So popular was he that he was affectionately called “Banda”, but never with his full name. His work as an actor, producer and director filled half his life and he devoted the remaining half of his life to the development and propagation of Kuchipudi dance.

Born on January 20, 1907 in a small village called “Atapaka” (which means a thatched shed used for a performance) in Kaikalur Taluk of Krishna district to Sundaramma and Srisailam, Banda was a born actor. Bringing children of his age together he used to perform, extemporaneously, scenes that impressed him in the local theatre performances. In 1927 he joined the Noble college for his graduation and found students of similar taste and gathered

them together to do the famous Mahabharata play “Pandavodyogam” by the celebrated poet-dramatists, Tirupati Venkata kavulu. He acted as Sri Krishna in that play, a role that would never leave him either on the stage or on the screen, always throwing an aura of fame around him all through his life.

Banda joined the law college at Madras which opened up for him new vistas of theatre, for he was recognized as the new shining star of the Andhra stage. Under the auspices of the law college, he produced and directed the play “Kalidas” in which he took the role of the poet Kalidasa. It was here that he performed the play “Sarangadhara” in which he played the lead character, a role he played both on the stage and the screen. He played as Sri Krishna in “Tulabharam”, and as Chanakya in the play “Chandragupta”. By 1932 when he left the law college, he was an established actor. However be his attraction toward the stage, Banda was enlisted as a lawyer at the Eluru bar. But by 1935 he started getting offers in the cinema feild. He did the lead roles in about twenty movies, but did not like the atmosphere and came back to Eluru. Even the lawyer’s profession did not attract him. So he withdrew from the legal profession and chose to be a full-time actor.

Banda founded the Prabhat Theatres in 1938 and for two decades he was fully engaged in developing a repertoire of his own. With the already established plays like “Pandavodyogam” and “Pandava Vijayam”, “Sarangadhara”, “Tulabharam”, “Kalidas” and “Paduka Pattabhishekam”, he also got new plays written for him by the famous playwright Utukuti Satyanarayana Rao. Meanwhile, he also started an acting school “Andhra Nataka Kalasala” in 1938 and ran it successfully for two years. His constant touring on account of his acting schedules diluted the work at the school and so he closed it. But his zeal for theatre education lived all through his life and partly fulfilled when he was appointed as the Drama producer at All India Radio station, Vijayawada in which capacity he produced more than 300 plays, some classical, some historical and many social.

From 1952-56, Banda was a member of the central Sangeet Natak Akademi, in which capacity he prepared a detailed “Scheme for the Development of Drama and Theatre in India”, which was critically acclaimed as a document that outlined the basic needs of Indian theatre.

After initially dilly-dallying on the issue of giving a classical dance status to Kuchipudi in 1958 the central Sangeet Natak Akademi ultimately conceded after the A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi held an unprecedented show of solidarity by organizing a festival and a seminar on Kuchipudi. Banda spoke about the importance of Kuchipudi dance in that seminar. In 1960 the Central government initiated a scheme for exchanging cultural troupes of one state to another state. It naturally selected the most prominent group of Kuchipudi yakshagana, Sri Venkatarama Natya Mandali to give performances in Tamil Nadu. The government selected Banda to be the leader of this team.



Banda (extreme left in the first row) with other Kuchipudi luminaries in the 1964 All India Dance Festival at Hyderabad.

Banda never did things by halves. He was so deeply involved in the yakshagana tradition, that he and the artistic director of the team, Chinta Krishna Murthy carefully designed the entire show, had new costumes prepared and thoroughly rehearsed the pieces to be presented.

Banda's introductions before the shows began, went a long way to make non-Telugu people understand the nuances of Kuchipudi dance, especially the Bhama kalapam. Connoisseurs in Madras, Tanjore and Coimbatore and again in Madras came in thousands. All the stalwarts like Rukmini Devi Arundale, Balasaraswathi, V.Raghavan, Kittappa Pillai, Prof. P.Samba Murthy and a large contingent of Bharatanatyam exponents attended. Never before was Andhra's artistic excellence appreciated so unhesitatingly by experts of another art form and another linguistic area. Andhras in Madras held their heads high with pride. The credit for this glory goes to a large extent to Banda, who carefully scrutinised the smallest of details.

After the team returned to Kuchipudi, Banda organized a felicitation function in honour of the team and requested the then minister for Endowments, Kalluri Chandra Mouli, to attend it. Banda made a strong plea for starting an institution to impart training in Kuchipudi dance. The Minister sanctioned a sum of Rs. 50,000 on the spot, the initial amount to be used for starting the Siddhendra Kalakshetram.

Similarly, in 1961 A.P., Sangeet Natak Akademi offered a sum of Rs. 25,000/- for producing a play, "Ksheera Sagara Mathanam" and made Banda the producer of the play and Vempati Chinna Satyam as the director. It was produced by Venkatarama Natya Mandali. The dance drama drew full crowds wherever it was performed and had unprecedented success both artistically and financially. With the approval of the A.P. Sangeet Natak Akademi, Banda gave Rs. 50,000 from the proceeds for starting the Kalakshetra school at Kuchipudi and got a matching grant from the State Government. He also got another lakh of rupees from the Central Government to start a museum and a gallery.

Banda's dream was fulfilled when Siddhendra Kalakshetram came into existence as a full-fledged institution for Kuchipudi dance with Chinta Krishna Murthy as the Principal. Banda served as the secretary of the Kalakshetra. It was mostly because of Banda's initiative that Kuchipudi gained recognition all over the country as an important classical dance form. His efforts bore fruit when the institute was started.

For his untiring services to Telugu drama and Kuchipudi dance, Banda was honoured with the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1964. He passed away on December 3, 1968 and Kuchipudi lost a selfless devotee of the art form.

G.M. Sharma (b. 1936)



G.M. Sharma (Garikapati Muralikrishna Sharma), a rare kind of a connoisseur of Kuchipudi, whose efforts to propagate Kuchipudi by organizing huge festivals at metropolitan cities where he worked as a senior central government officer, is to be remembered by the entire Kuchipudi community for bringing together a galaxy of Kuchipudi luminaries and the young and promising dancers on to one platform so that lovers of dance in non-Telugu areas would not only enjoy the diverse fare offered, but also be able to see the best dancers performing.

Sharma worked in the Department of Explosives, having obtained his M.Sc. degree in geo-physics. He was known as a strict officer in a delicate governmental position. He retired as Deputy Chief Comptroller of Explosives, Govt. of India. Prior to that he held important administrative positions at Calcutta, Nagpur

and Mumbai. In all the places he worked, Sharma became an active member of the Andhra Mahasabhas.

Sharma's tryst with Kuchipudi started in 1975 when he saw guru Vempati Chinna Satyam's "Srinivasa Kalyanam". He was so thrilled by its artistic and presentational excellence that such superb performances, which gave soul-filling experiences, must be seen by larger number of audiences. From that day onwards he wanted to do something to promote Kuchipudi in general and Chinna Satyam's performances in particular.

Sharma worked at Kolkata during 1981-86. Almost every year he organized Chinna Satyam's newly choreographed dance dramas for the benefit of the dance lovers of Kolkata. In 1985 Sharma saw a huge Kathak Mahotsav in Kolkata and on similar lines planned the first Kuchipudi Mahotsav in the city from February 22 to 25, 1986.

This first Kuchipudi festival featured very important exponents of the dance form. It was inaugurated by Kapila Vatsyayan, the eminent critic of Indian performing arts and aesthetics. The lec-dems for the first time tried to explain the intricacies in Kuchipudi. Lec-dem by Vempati Chinna Satyam with Pappu Venugopala Rao's commentary was the highlight of the festival. Also included in the festival were other lec-dems by Vedantam Prahlada Sarma on the training system in Kuchipudi, C.R.Acharyulu on temple dance traditions of Andhra and Thandava Krishna on Andhra and Karnataka yakshagana traditions. Korada Narasimha Rao on the *uddhata* roles in Kuchipudi and Swapna Sundari on Bhama kalapam were the other well-received lec-dems. For sheer variety and masterly presentations, the lec-dems stood out. The performances were no less important. Yamini Krishna Murthy, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Swapna Sundari, Sobha Naidu, Manju Barggave, Raja and Radha Reddy, Tarveen Mehra and Smitha Shastry gave scintillating performances. Kala Krishna's performance in feminine impersonation in Andhra Natyam was very enthusiastically received. It looked as though the entire who's who in Kuchipudi performed in the Mahotsav. The highlights of

the Festival were *Ksheera Sagara Mathanam* and *Sri Krishna Parijatham*, two dance dramas choreographed by Vempati Chinna Satyam. Another stunning performance was given by Vempati Chinna Satyam, for an hour. The audience was spell-bound. The Mahotsav's success, hailed by the press and Kolkata's cultured audiences was unprecedented. Such a rich fare of Kuchipudi was never presented even in its native state.

By the end of 1986, Sharma was transferred to Nagpur. Even here he first organized Vempati's *Srinivasa Kalyanam* which was a roaring success. In 1987 and 1989 Sharma organized two Kuchipudi Mahotsavs in Nagpur which were as innovative and comprehensive as the Kolkata one. In this festival the lec-dems by Vempati and Raja-Radha Reddy became very popular. In 1989 Vempati presented *Hara Vilasam* and *Sri Krishna Parijatham*, two dance dramas choreographed by Vempati, and as usual, received encomiums.

In 1990 Sharma was transferred to Mumbai. He immediately jumped into action. Before going in for a Mahotsav, he wanted to feel the pulse of the Mumbai audience and organized Vempati's *Hara Vilasam* and *Srinivasa Kalyanam* in 1992. As both the dance dramas were received very favourably, the fourth Kuchipudi Mahotsav was put on boards in Mumbai with all the top Kuchipudi artists participating in it. Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Vempati Chinna Satyam, Raja-Radha Reddy, Mallika Sarabhai, Swapna Sundari, Alekhya Punjala, Manju Bharggave, Korada Narasimha Rao with his team, Jayarama Rao and Vanashri Rao, Anuradha Nehru and Anuradha Jonnalagadda performed during the festival.

This festival was important in yet another way. The traditional yakshaganas vied with modern dance dramas. Siddhendra Kalakshetram presented their *magnum opus*, *Bhakta Prahlada*. Chinna Satyam's dance dramas *Srinivasa Kalyanam*, *Hara Vilasam* and *Mohini Bhasmasura* were staged. Renowned film artists and disciples of Chinna Satyam - Hema Malini and



Vempati Chinna Satyam inaugurating Kuchipudi Kala Kendra at Mumbai.
At the extreme right is G.M.Sharma

Meenakshi Seshadri - gave full-fledged solo performances. Krishna Sweta demonstrated Kuchipudi on roller skates.

Another striking feature of this Mahotsav was the music seminar, devoted exclusively to dance music of Kuchipudi. Veterans like M.Bala Murali Krishna, Balantrapu Rajanikantha Rao, P.Sangeeta Rao, V.Sarala Rao and others participated. Vempati, Nataraja Ramakrishna, Uma Rama Rao and Korada Narasimha Rao presented lec-dems. Gurus and disciples of other classical forms attended these sessions and participated in the deliberations. Kuchipudi flag flew high in Mumbai after this memorable festival. The credit for making the Mahotsav, right from its planning to successful execution, goes entirely to G.M.Sharma and his highly devoted associates.

As a consequence of the success of the festival, there was a persistent clamour from young girls and boys and their parents to have a school for imparting Kuchipudi dance in Mumbai.

In 1995 “Kuchipudi Kala Kendra”, a nodal institution to streamline all activities concerning Kuchipudi was started with G.M. Sharma as its secretary and under its aegis a Kuchipudi school was started. M.S.R. Murthy was brought as the main teacher. In

course of time the Mumbai school started four different branches to impart training. In 1997 Kala Kedra started a school in Kolkata with Madhuri Pal as its head. Another branch was started at Nagpur.

The next festival was in 1996 which saw a large contingent of young talent participating along with the established senior dancers. Pasumarthi Vittal, Mallika Ramprasad, Kalpana, Bharathi, Vyjayanthi Kashi performed in the festival. Solos by renowned dancers like Swapna Sundari, Raja-Radha Reddy and Manju Bhargava were the major attractions. A dance ballet, “Keechaka vadha” was presented by Pasumarthi Venkateswara Sarma.

Another Mahotsav from Jan. 21 to 23, 1999 had two important projections. One was to showcase two traditions side by side : Melattur Bhagavatha Mela and Kuchipudi yakshagana on one side and Kuchipudi Bhama kalapam and the Bhama kalapam of Andhra Natyam on the other. This gave scope for an excellent comparative analysis of two neighbourly, allied dance forms. The other major projection was to showcase duets of Kuchipudi dancers. Raja and Radha Reddy, Vempati Ravishankar and Sri Vidya, Meenakshi Seshadri and M.V.N Murthy performed in this category and stole the show. There were also group presentations : “Alaya Nritya” by disciples of Voleti Rangamani showed an entirely new area of Andhra dance traditions. Vempati Chinna Satyam’s *Ksheera Sagara Mathanam* was presented during this festival. V.A.K. Ranga Rao conducted a slide show on the theme “Kuchipudi dance in Telugu cinema”.

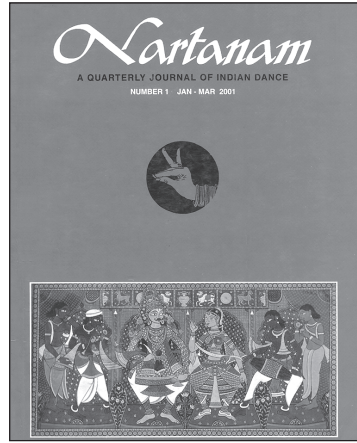
The last Mahotsav under the aegis of Kuchipudi Kala Kendra was conducted in 2001. Several newly choreographed dance dramas made their way and showcased new potential. Pasumarthi Venkateswara Sarma’s *Mahishasura Mardini* and Pasumarthi Ramalinga Sastry’s *Gajananeeyam* are in the yakshagana style, whereas Usha Gayatri’s *Gopika Krishna* represented the later-day dance drama style. Two styles in feminine impersonation by Vedantam Venkatachalapathi (Kuchipudi) and Kala Krishna (Andhra Natyam) were a delight. Jaya Rama Rao and Vanashree Rao’s *Dasavatara* was very well received.

It was during the 2001 festival the Kuchipudi Kala Kendra decided to publish a journal on Kuchipudi dance. After deliberations with experts, it was decided to publish a journal on all the classical dance styles of India with an emphasis on Kuchipudi. Prof. M. Nagabhushana Sarma, an eminent scholar of performing arts was requested to be the Chief Editor. G.M. Sharma was the Publisher on behalf of the Kuchipudi Kalakendra, Mumbai.

The first issue of the journal, *Nartanam* (January-March, 2001), was to be released by Vempati Chinna Satyam, but since Vempati could not attend the festival, the journal was released by Mrs. Kanak Rele, Director of the Nalanda Research Institute and a renowned Mohini Attam exponent.

Though Vempati's and his family's, attitude towards Kuchipudi Kala Kendra and its inspiring force Mr.G.M.Sharma was growing slowly to be lukewarm,

Sharma continued his efforts to widen the understanding of Kuchipudi. He spearheaded a seminar at Hyderabad in 2004 in co-ordination with the Telugu University about the problems related to teaching and learning of Kuchipudi. He also continued to publish *Nartanam* from 2001 and was its publisher until 2012. These twelve years, publishing *Nartanam* has been a very fruitful and meaningful exercise. Its special numbers on stalwarts (Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, Chinta Venkataramaiah, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Vempati Chinna Satyam (Kuchipudi), Nataraja Ramakrishna (Andhra Natyam), Birju Maharaj (Kathak), Kelucharan Mohapatra (Odissi), Rukmini Devi (Bharatanatyam), Uday Shankar (Indian Modern Dance), Ram gopal (Bharatanatyam and modern dance), Balasaraswathi were received with great enthusiasm and were considered to be



The first issue of 'Nartanam'.

authoritative and scholarly. Similarly, *Nartanam's* special issues on each dance form (on Bharata Natyam, on Kathakali, on Mohini Attam and on Manipuri) are literally considered to be comprehensive text books on these dance forms.



Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvenir, 1993

Such was the long story of G.M. Sharma who had spared no time, energy and finances so that Kuchipudi dance gets the recognition due to it, especially in non-Telugu areas. Every artist of recognised merit was showcased in the festivals. Seminars were meaningful and educative. Souvenirs edited by Smt. K. Subadra Murthy and brought out during the festivals with well-researched articles offered the most dependable materials on Kuchipudi.

Nartanam is a trail-bazer and continues to be a researcher's delight.

What else would a man need to be remembered by Kuchipudi lovers all over the country ? The whole Kuchipudi family bows in gratitude to the meticulous work and selfless devotion shown by GM Sharma. It is such people's love for the art that sustains any art form. Long live the tribe.

References

1. "Kuchipudi Bharatamu," *Golkonda Patrika* (daily), Hyderabad, dated 6.10.1941.
2. *Andhra Patrika* (daily), January 13,1942.
3. Banda Kananakalingeswara Rao's detailed description is one of our major source materials for this eventful tour.
4. The *Kuchipudi Mahotsav Souvernirs*, published in 1993, 1996 and 1997 edited by Ms. K. Subadra Murthy are the earliest annual numbers in English which created a real academic interest among scholars and students on Kuchipudi dance.

