

## “Identity and Culture Politics in Kuchipudi”

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### Abstract

Creating an identity and an urge of recognition was considered as a common expression that the pan India faced during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. To develop the same consciousness and to spread the trigger of recognition many scholarly articles were published. The recognition of certain performing art tradition, re – scribing and re – constructing the histories of certain traditions were to uplift one’s own cultural identity. This article focusses on the development and transformation of the group – brahmin – male performing art form Bhagavata Mela Natakam to a non – brahmin – female – performing art form Kuchipudi. At the same time, the article contests the deformities in the selection and criteria of representation of the art and how that has been politically mapped.

### Keywords:

- Culture
- Identity
- Kuchipudi
- Orientalism
- Performing tradition

### Recognition and identity:

In India, the nationalist movement against the British rule in the late 19th century and the early 20th century witnessed a tremendous urge for the reassertion of traditional values as well as an attempt to bring in a total awareness and awakening among the Indians of their rich cultural heritage. This could involuntarily bring in a consciousness of identifying oneself with one's own cultural points. Thus the ‘dwindling sense of identity’, has been resurrected with the cultural points that were formulated by the revival and reconstruction of several art forms. These cultural reforms, along with the political and socio-cultural reforms have played a pivotal role in conceiving an imagery idea of ‘Cultural India’.

Creating an identity and an urge of recognition was considered as a common expression that the pan India faced during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. To develop the same consciousness and to spread the trigger of recognition many scholarly articles were published. The recognition of certain performing art tradition, re – scribing and re – constructing the histories of certain traditions were to uplift ones own cultural identity. This research work focusses on the development and transformation of the group – brahmin – male performing art form Bhagavata Mela Natakam to a non – brahmin – female – performing art form Kuchipudi.

Kuchipudi, is a physical place, a village located in Krishna District, along Krishna river. The earlier name of the village Kuchipudi was referred as Kuchelapuram. The literary narratives<sup>1</sup> on Kuchipudi have mentioned this fact that Kuchipudi is the current name of then Kuchelapuram. But the reasons to the shift in the name has not been traced in the literary sources. The interviews with eminent artistes of Kuchipudi also referred that *over a period of time the name has been transformed*<sup>2</sup>. But the reasons and the year in which that has been transformed is unclear. The literal meaning of ‘Koochi’ is small and ‘pudi’ is village. So, it could be an identification of a small village at that part of Krishna district because geographically there is another physical place named ‘Pedapudi’ which translate to a big village.

## The Orient perception of Kuchipudi

The literary narratives on the Orient and Occidental view of the ‘puritan’ concept of the Victorian Era suggest that it was impossible for the Orient to accept certain practicing traditions of India. They could never understand the ideology attached and associated to the Indians performing and practicing traditions. They bifurcated India from the associated culture, heritage and arts. The colonial rule could not ‘digest’ the practice of devadasi system in India, and they denounced the system in 1911. On parallel to this, there was another form of dancing that sprouted, and that was named as Orient form of dancing. This was referred to the dance pieces that were choreographed by the artistes in the West, taking their inspiration from East. Many western stalwarts have attempted this either through paintings, or literature or their direct entry to India had inspired them to formulate something of that flavor. The artists like, Ruth St: Dennis, Anna Pavlova, La Meri and Ragini Devi are some of the main stalwarts among them. La Meri and Ragini Devi came to India and learned the Indian forms from the ‘authentic Gurus’. La Meri visited India in 1936, she learnt Bharatanatyam under the tutelage of Papanasam Vadi Velu Pillai and Mylapore Gowri Ammal and Kathak from Ram Dutt Misra. Ragini Devi is considered to be

<sup>1</sup> Refer articles written by

Rumya Putcha *Between History and Historiography*

M. Harshita’s article *Impersonations: The Artifice of Brahmin Masculinity in South Indian Dance*,  
 Reginald Massey’s *India’s Dances: Their History, Technique, and Repertoire*

There were many online reading sites like ‘good read’ where the evolution of the place name Kuchipudi was defined as “*Kuchipudi itself is a shortened form of Kuchelapuram or Kuchilapuri, which in turn is believed to have originated from Kuseelavapuri – the abode of the Kuseelavas. Kuseelavas were bands of actors wandering from place to place*”.

Also refer Rajyalakshmi Seth’s *Annotated Bibliography on Kuchipudi Dance Sources*

<sup>2</sup> Personal interview with Vedantam Shanthi and Pasumarthi Seshubabu

the first Western artist who brought Kathakali outside Kerala and presented it in other parts of India, which she did in the year of 1932, with Kalamandalam Gopinath as her partner (Mohan Khokar, 1981). The Orient form of dancing has become very popular in the West, with the help of visionaries like Uday Shankar, they teamed up to explore the rustic nature of India. On contrary to that, Occidental was preparing itself to bring back its lost glory with the revival and reconstruction of its own forms. In this course, there was a process of nationalism, state patronage and sponsorship that was instigated in the appropriation of certain regional art forms as 'national' and therefore they fall under the category of 'classical'. The paradoxical part of the whole scenario was the one who appropriated Indian dance forms were marked as modern subjects and Indian dancers as carriers of tradition.

Apart from these, there is another group of artistes who dedicated their lives to the Indian performing art traditions. They did not appropriate the form, but they went ahead to find the routes, learn, understand and analyze the form. They facilitate and make a path for the classical performing traditions to be accepted globally. Most importantly they propagated the forms widely not only among Orientals but also to Occidentals. Their literary narratives are substantiated works on the early Indian performing art traditions and the socio – political scenario prevalent at that time.

### ***The Cultural Revivalist***

This was the title given to Ragini Devi by *The New York City*<sup>3</sup>, on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1982 while announcing her death. She was widely known as an American who introduced "cultural revivalism" in the classical dance tradition in United States as well as in India. Born as Esther Sherman, she was deeply interested in dance. She has many books to her credit. She was born in Michigan in the United States in 1896, as Esther Sherman. She had deeper fascination for the Indian dancing at an early age of eight. It is said that as a teenager, she attempted to study the texts *Natyasastra* and *Abhinaya Darpana* with the help of a Sanskrit pundit. She had performed in the social functions her own versions of Indian dances. For these performances she took help of Indian students who lived in New York and the music accompanied were of Indian musical instruments. This passion of hers was further ignited when she saw a presentation (as slide show) of Kathakali by the scholar Dr James Cousins. Esther was drawn to India and her zest made her believe that she was an Indian in her previous birth. Thus, she met Indian physicist Ramlal Bajpai, whom she married, and changed her name into Ragini Devi<sup>4</sup>.

In 1942, she published *Nritanjali: An Introduction to Indian Dancing*, this was her first published book on Indian dancing written in English. It was in 1932 that she had her first contact with the dance form Kuchipudi. She states that

*In Kuchipudi Nritya Indian classical dancing has found a fluent medium of dramatic expression in dance form having an extensive vocabulary of gestures*

<sup>3</sup> Refer column 'People, Places, Things': *Cultural Revivalist, Ragini Devi, Dies*. The New York City. News India. January 29, 1982. pp:4, procured from the archives of Sangeet Natak Akademi

<sup>4</sup> The brief bio of Ragini is from the article written by Sukanya Rahman published by the Indian Express on 07/06/2002, procured from the archives of Sangeet Natak Akademi.

*for conveying narrative and dramatic themes, moods and states in the Natya Sastra tradition.*

(Marg 1966:37)

She went to Beszwada (current Vijayawada) from Madras to attend performances of Kuchipudi artistes. She was very much impressed by the *clarity of abhinaya and the vitality of the mimetic dance*. This urged her to request Vedantam Chinta Venkataramaiah, the guru to teach her. She had chosen Dasavatara Sabdam as an item to be learnt from the repertoire. The guru asked Vedantam Raghaviah to instruct her demonstration. Venkataramaiah himself wrote the Telugu text for her. She described about the gestures that she had written at that time during her stay at Kuchipudi. Though in the article *The Revival of Kuchipudi Nritya* she widely spoke about the repertoire, presentation and history of Kuchipudi, nowhere she mentioned about her performance. Ragini had clearly mentioned that she taught Dasavathara Sabdam to Indrani, her daughter.

The program posters, reviews and literary sources describe that the presentation of Ragini included some Indian dances and Kathakali, Kuchipudi was mentioned nowhere. But her extensive literary work about Kuchipudi in *Dance Dialects of India* and articles published in many magazines have opened up a new outlook for Kuchipudi in a wider reading circle. She never forgot to explain her love and passion towards Kuchipudi. On literary work saw her concern for the future of Kuchipudi too. Though Ragini was widely accepted in the Indian performing scenario, she definitely had to work a lot to make a mark in West. She believed that in order to recreate the spirituality and essence of Indian performing forms, one had to feel the Indianness. *The American Weekly* in 1926, published an interview of Ragini, in which she described herself as a

*girl of Kashmir, a high – caste brahmin. Who had spent much of her childhood in the secret sanctuaries of India and Tibet, studying the invisible dances and inaudible music of Tibet – dancing that cannot be seen by the untrained eye and music that cannot be heard by the untrained ear. (Thobani 2017:35)*

This throws light on the fact that she had to act and make belief herself as an Indian in order to perform the Indian art form. The question of authenticity continuously contested inside which made her change her name. The ‘insider’ – ‘outsider’, the oriental – occidental ideas might have created a lot of dispute in her. But her art and work were greatly approved in India. Esther Sherman is an out product of imagined community. As Benedict Anderson aptly coined the term *Imagined Community*, which depicts nation as a socially constructed entity that consists of people who perceive themselves as part of that group. The moment she changed her name to Ragini Devi, she has become part of imagined community where she perceived herself as an Indian passionate about dance.

The title of the brochure *Ragini Singer of Hindu Songs, Dancer of Hindu Dance, Player upon the Tappura and Sitar* is a highly political move to be part of the imagined community. The repeated usage of ‘Hindu’ where she connotes the word to both religion and language that

gives an authenticity of Indian in an Orientalist view. Even her interview on American Weekly where she claims herself as a high class brahmin denotes the aftermath of the invented tradition that she perceived when she was in Madras. She has seen the reconstruction of the history of the performing tradition, where the 'brahmin, high – class' was accepted. She might have anticipated that in order to part of the performing tradition she would have to project herself as high class brahmin. Even when she performed in India, it was written that nobody could deny that she hailed from a high class Indian brahmin society. She was politically and secretly secured in her imagined community leaving no room of doubt either in West nor East.

### *Goddess of Oriental Art*<sup>5</sup>

Indrani Rahman, daughter of Ragini Devi (Esther Sherman) and Ramalal Bajpai, was born on 19<sup>th</sup> September 1930 at Madras Presidency (current Chennai). Indrani was born into the elite, multicultural social milieu. She has learnt from her mother to be fiercely independent and liberal minded. She was initiated into dance by her mother and at the age of nine she accompanied her mother for performances. Both mother – daughter duo gave scintillating performances in the West and East alike. Little Indrani underwent training in Bharatanatyam under the tutelage of Chokkalingam Pillai and later she moved to Bezwada (current Vijaywada) where she imparted training in Kuchipudi from Korada Narsimha Rao. She furthered her training in Odissi and Mohiniyattam too.

Indrani's Indian debut was at the New Empire Theatre in Calcutta in 1950. Since then, following her mother's footsteps she had given performances in all parts of India<sup>6</sup>. In the beginning of the mid 1950's, the Ragini-Indrani mother-daughter duo, undertook extensive overseas tours. They have performed in various cities across the globe and enthralled the hordes of classical dance lovers. Indrani Rahman became the first dancer, who performed on the National tour by the Asia Society in 1961.

She has received ample accolades including the *Femina Miss India* Award in 1952, *Padma Shri* in 1969 and the *Sangeet Natak Akademi Award* in 1981, for her contributions in the field of dance. She was also a faculty member of the dance division of *Juilliard School* in New York's prestigious *Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts* in 1976. Indrani Rahman died on 5 February 1999 in New York, Aged 68.

Regarding her performance at Ted Shawn's Annual Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival drew highly enthusiastic capacity audiences. The prominent factor of the whole performance was the introduction given to Indrani by Ted Shawn himself as *fine, technically perfect exponent of the dance form of her native land. It is a privilege for me to have her and her fine troupe appear on stage*<sup>7</sup>. The *Choreography Excellent* quoted "New York Times" and described Korada as a

<sup>5</sup> Refer *In her Mother's Footsteps: Indrani completes Triumphant US tour*. This article was published in American Reporter on 7/09/1960. This article states that Indrani was referred like this by the dance critics of New York.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

character dancer who was outstanding. In New York, her presentation *Temple Rhythms of India* at the Barbizon Plaza Theatre received enthusiastic response from New York audiences. Dance critics hailed her as *an exceptionally beautiful woman and a highly exciting dancer and a goddess of Oriental Art*<sup>8</sup>.

Indranis' performances were entitled as *Indian Classical Dance*, in which she would incorporate items from different performing art genres. Her presentation was an amalgamation of items from Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi and Mohiniyattam. But, the reviews of the performances have highlighted Kuchipudi as the focal point of her presentation. It could be stated that the Orient audiences had recognized the vitality, vigor and vivaciousness of Kuchipudi. Thus, the art form was well accepted and recognized in the West.

Some of her performances were funded by the Government of India. Her American tour in 1960 is one such. She is the first Indian dancer to receive a Government of India travel Grant for an American visit<sup>9</sup>. In all her international performances she was accompanied by Korada, her Guru and her dancing partner. Almost all her Kuchipudi performances were either conducted by him as a Nattuvanar or he performed along with her as her dancing partner.

The performance reviews traced through the research work reflect the kind of exposure and wide acceptance that Indrani received. Her choreographic works had been acclaimed with rave reviews as an Oriental performer who functioned for the upliftment and popularization of different classical genres of performing tradition. She, along with Korada were able to create an identity for the art form Kuchipudi, even before it was popular among the East. Ragini and Indrani could be considered as facilitators who could bring in acceptance for Kuchipudi among the Orientalists. If Ragini was able to articulate about the art form through her literary works, Indrani was able to popularize it through her performances. These literary works and the performances highlight the admiration and acceptance that they could bring forth among the global audience.

On the other hand, the article argues the facts that might have allowed Indrani or Ragini to project an authoritative approach to reach the orientalist audiences as cultural ambassadors of India. The literary resources heighten the social contacts that Indrani maintained after shifting from Calcutta to Delhi. Through her contact points, it was easy for her to get into the cultural milieu of performing arts, that also made her eligible to attain funds for travelling as well as performing. The article *Canvas of Custom* by Nitya describes the view of Sukanya (Indran's daughter) regarding the importance of the contact points that facilitated her to get into the mainstream performance.

*When Gandhiji died, Pandit Nehru asked my father to design the Gandhi Ghat and he also designed one of the tallest buildings in India, the New Secretariat in Calcutta. So it caught the eye of Panditji and he was brought to Delhi as a senior architect and then chief architect. In 1952 we moved to Delhi. Soon my*

<sup>8</sup>.Ibid

<sup>9</sup> Refer *In her Mother's Footsteps: Indrani completes Triumphant US tour*. This article was published in American Reporter on 7/09/1960.

*mother and our family got involved in a sort of the renaissance of the arts. Every evening we had artists, musicians, dancers and painters in our house and it was then a very creative time for India. Nehru was sending my mother abroad on numerous cultural delegations<sup>10</sup>.*

These aspects make it clear that it was not only the love for the art form but also the circumstantial inferences where supportive for them. In this context, one aspect that need to be highlighted is the normal mental conditioning of press, media, cultural activists and the artists during the 1950's to 1960's. Their notion of highlighting an occidental performance and popularizing an art work should also be contested. The cultural strands in which a performance should be evaluated to understand the criteria of review. In this matter the review of Indrani by Abinash published in *Hindustan Standard* stand apart.

*Indrani presented two Kuchipudi numbers – Chamundeshwari Sabdam and Mandooka Sabdam. These items clearly unfolded the manliness of the art and proved beyond doubt its origins from tantric Saivite cult. Its form was folkish: its narrative quality was Kathak. Its gestures were unrefined. The Treta Kul (three worlds) was, for instance, indicated by three fingers brought at the fore head – a position basically incomprehensible. In a similar way, the symbolization of the Brahma weapon lacked subtlety<sup>11</sup>.*

This performance review was published in 1960, by then, according to the historical record, Kuchipudi has been declared as a classical art form. This review signifies a projection of distorted history of Kuchipudi. Kuchipudi has been traced as an offspring of Bhakti cult, and nowhere there is reference of *tantric* corollaries. He classifies the form as *folkish* and the narrative quality as that of *Kathak*. The contradiction is that, by 1959 Kuchipudi had been declared as a classical art form, and nowhere it traced any resemblance with that of *Kathak*. Regarding the mudra of three worlds, none of the videos of 1950's – 60's infers a mudra of the same kind. So, the performative quality of the art form is contested at this juncture. Whether the cultural carriers represented the art form with appropriate technique, nuances and flavor of the form is border lined.

Another review of the same performance has referred her presentation as a *cocktail of classical dances*

<sup>10</sup> Refer *Canvas of Custom* by Nitya Vidyarthi. The article describes the life style and the political social scenario that led to the dancing tradition in the family of Indrani. It speaks about their family association with Nehru and other politicians, historians and cultural carriers. The article was published in "The Hindu", New Delhi edition of January 3, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> Article entitled as *Indrani at Fine Arts* written by Abinash published by "Hindustan Standard", Delhi edition on 5/02/1960. The article furthers to question the authoritativeness of 'classical'. This question aroused because she performed Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi and Mohiniyattam in the umbrella term Indian Classical Dance.

*In Kuchipudi, for instance, her footwork strongly smacked of Odissi. She rendered two Kuchipudi numbers – Chamundeswari Sabdam and Mandooka Sabdam. While the former suffered from lack of vigor, the latter was better. But the costume for the second number was incongruous. Korada Narasimha Rao, who recited the syllables for the first number has no musical voice and his utterances failed to match the virtuosity of this dance form<sup>12</sup>*

This review not only contest the performance quality of Indrani, but also the nattuvangam skills of Korada. This leads to the conclusion that the Orient viewed a palette of exotic extravaganza of East, which was exactly what they would have preferred to perceive. In the representation of the exotic extravaganza there was little space given to identify the quality of items. This could be substantiated with the theory of *Orientalism* by Said, he emphasizes the perception and understanding of representation of Orientalist. The representation of *East as exotic, feminine, weak and vulnerable*.

On the other hand, when cultural carriers were selected to propagate an art form, native performers were long forgotten. Though Indrani had Korada as a native performer of Kuchipudi along with the group. The accolades that he achieved as a performer could be contested with the expanse of articles and interviews that voiced his excellence as compared to that of Indrani. There are few literary narratives that could be found regarding his contribution, where as he was selected as the best male dancer in the Jacob's Pillow Festival. The major factor that the native artists lacked could be the communication skill. As the native performers were not well versed in English they might not have struck the chord. Another reason could be their contact points, since they lacked in communication skill, their performance arena was succumbed to their native area. As far as Kuchipudi is concerned, the art form was popular in the villages of Krishna District, where the traditional artistes were striving to find a place in the cultural map. The regional history of Kuchipudi in 1950's – 60's comprised of female artistes like Kanchanamala who performed and conversed in English, but their contact points could never reach them till Nehru. On parallel, there were convent educated women like Indrani who could take the art to overseas and perform it for global audience.

In this whole procedure, if the concept of the identity of a performing art tradition need to be valued and labelled, how would that be possible? According to the literary narratives, the different genres of performing traditions like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Odissi and Mohiniyattam were culminated as part of Indrani's presentation. She used to entitle the whole presentation as *Indian Classical Dances*. As an entire presentation, it might appeal good, but individually whether it fit into the frame work of its own genre is a question. This same point was mentioned in the review of Indrani's performance at the Fine Arts Theatre that raised eyebrows of critics<sup>13</sup>. They have questioned her authoritativeness and juggling of one form to the other. The analysis of these reviews also throw light on the aspects of authenticity and

<sup>12</sup> Refer *A Cocktail of Dances*: Times of India, Delhi published on 5/02/1960. This review has deconstructed the notion of performing pieces of different performing art traditions as Indian Classical dance.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

clumsiness that prevailed when the presentation is an amalgamation of many genres of performances on the same stage. There is no doubt that these performances make the audience aware of the existence of certain performing art traditions. But, the standards and authenticity of the performance would be skeptical.

When the oriental dancers were celebrated as the cultural carriers, the native performers were left unidentified in the native as well as global platform. The selection of performers like Indrani to represent India in a global platform could be a conscious effort to have a perfect stamp on the global cultural map. The orientalist view of Indian classical dance could be easily conveyed through Indrani as she maintained the aura in her physicality, language and communication. The native performers like Kanchanamala could not bring in the orientalist perception of aura and communication which denied them the lime light of global platform. For a nation that was re – defining and re – discovering a new realm globally, it was essential to have a signifier who would project Indianness and independence in its nationalist and feministic denotations.

*Dancers of the 50's – 80's blatantly used gender in negotiating performances, audiences and income. If dancers were not endowed with mango breasts, wasp waists and elephant hips, padding was built strategically into pre – sewn costumes. If dancers were dark skinned, a base make – up was applied to lighten the skin tone. The use of authentic silk and gold costumes and real bridal jewelry still denote a full and loving offering/ sacrifice to the deity of the dance*

(Uttara, 2004:56)

This clearly emphasize the concept of a female dancer that was present in the Indian psyche at that period. Accordingly, Indrani perfectly fit into the category. The fair skinned – English speaking dancer was considered as an asset to highlight the Indian community globally. These ideological connotations were welcomed by the press and media alike. They celebrated the achievements of Indrani, and this is clearly perceived when she is identified as *Oriental Goddess*<sup>14</sup>. To imprint nation's name in the global cultural map, Nehru might have thought to identify a dancer who could gratify the Orientalist ideology. Thus, a political authoritative indulgence could be perceived in projecting the artistes who satiate the Oriental ideology.

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