



From Village Roots to Global Stages

The enduring legacy of Kūchipudi

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Kūchipuḍi is a form of South Indian classical dance-drama that developed in the village of *Kuchēlapuram*, in the south-eastern part of Andhra Pradesh. The descendants of nearly three hundred Telugu Brahmin families continue to live in *Kuchēlapuram*, preserving a dance tradition in which, historically, only males were initiated and trained across generations. Men also impersonated female characters, portraying roles such as *Satyabhama* with expressive grace and dramatic depth as part of the tradition's theatrical heritage. Around the fourteenth century, the southern parts of India were ruled by a succession of dynasties committed to the propagation of art and literature. Under this royal patronage, the classical arts flourished and evolved into sophisticated systems of storytelling, music, and movement.

The Kūchipuḍi solo repertoire evolved through selected segments of the traditional *Nāṭya (dance-drama) Meḷa* and *Naṭṭuva (solo) Meḷa* traditions, incorporating expressive *nṛtya* passages and repertoire pieces such as the *Taraṅgam*—a unique performance involving dancing on the edge of a brass plate while balancing a pot filled with water on the head. These pieces

were often independent of the original themes and stories of the dance-drama tradition. The introduction of the solo format was pioneered by Guru *Vedantam Lakshminarayana Shastry*, who transformed the dance-drama tradition into a versatile art form and introduced the 'solo system' of dance to the previously male-dominated, group-drama-focused Kūchipuḍi. He was the first to teach and encourage women to perform, defying traditional restrictions that limited performance to men.

The elements of Kūchipuḍi are drawn in detail from the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. The *Nāṭyaśāstra* describes four kinds of Abhinaya—*āṅgika*, *vāchika*, *āhārya*, and *sāttvika*. Abhinaya, a synthesis of these four expressive modes, is reflected in the pieces that constitute *nṛitya* in a Kūchipuḍi solo repertoire. Through expressive storytelling, rhythmic footwork, graceful movements, and dramatic characterization, Kūchipuḍi creates a powerful emotional connection between performer and audience.

Over time, the art form has undergone significant transformation and has spread widely across the globe. Today, more women are actively involved in the practice and performance of Kūchipuḍi, contributing to its growth and



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international recognition. Women have also taken on male roles, portraying characters such as *Hiranyakashipu* and *Krishna* in *Yakshaganams*. Contemporary productions now explore themes beyond mythology, incorporating social issues, human emotions, environmental awareness, women's voices, and cultural identity. Yet, the inherent dramatization of the art form continues to uphold traditional values and reconnect audiences with rich cultural roots.

In today's fast-paced and technology-driven world, Kūchipuḍi remains deeply relevant because it preserves an important link to heritage while continuing to evolve with society. The art form promotes discipline, concentration, physical endurance, and emotional sensitivity among practitioners. It also serves as a medium for cultural education, helping younger generations understand and engage with Indian philosophy, literature, music, and mythology. Furthermore, the expressive and narrative nature of Kūchipuḍi transcends language barriers, allowing universal themes of devotion, love, courage, and compassion to resonate with audiences around the world.

Thus, Kūchipuḍi is not merely a preserved classical tradition but a living and evolving art form. Its ability to balance tradition with innovation ensures that it continues to inspire, educate, and remain meaningful in contemporary society.

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