

Men in Dance with Special Emphasis on Kuchipudi, a South Indian Classical Dance Tradition

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By

Rajesh Chavali (MA Kuchipudi)

Introduction

India is a country of diverse languages, religions, cultures and castes, all assimilated seamlessly with great integrity. We must acknowledge this is not a political decision but rather a course of evolution and history. A historic perspective of ancient India with several invasions and rulers of India that didn't belong to that land influenced a lot of what we see in today's India. As we can imagine and nothing out of ordinary, India has seen several intrinsic and extrinsic influences including socioeconomic condition, political influences, power struggle, hierarchy in the caste system, acceptance of the roles of man and woman in the social ecosystem, development and adoption of a variety of religions and philosophical schools of thoughts. For the scope of the current paper at this congress, I'll focus briefly on these influences and how Indian dances evolved over time and will present more detailed discussion of origin of Kuchipudi, a south Indian classical dance form as a male tradition in Indian classical dance history to its current state.

Extrinsic and Intrinsic Influences on Developing India over the Years

India, as a country, has undergone several political invasions, major influencers being Mughal and British invasions. The existing cultural dances of India (classical or other non-classical forms or non-classical forms of those times that later attained classical status) in parts of the country were heavily influenced by these invasions while the relatively untouched or inaccessible parts of India, such as northeast part of India largely retained their identity. Influence of these

political invasions transformed the temple dance culture to devadasi cult, huge impact that lasted several decades even after the devadasi abolition act, put in enactment on 9th October, 1947. Parallel development of hierarchy in the caste systems created parities between status driven dance repertoires dissecting out elite/classical vs. non-elite/non-classical dances of those days (current classical vs. folk dances). Religious believes that were found deep rooted in different cultures showed influence on the different gods propitiated in these art forms (Krishna/shiva/Vishnu/Allah/Buddha and more). Some of this religious influence combined with geographic part of India where these dance forms are practiced created unique identities (Odishi, Chauu, Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Kuchipudi, Sothria are some of the classical dances to name). Social acceptance of roles of men and women along with their social status and regions they lived in probably influenced the gender based participation of the dancers. Bharatanatyam originally originated from the dance styles practiced by temple dancers and devadasis later attained classical dance status as Bharatanatyam. Manipuri, Chauu and Sothriya have significant presence of male dancers along with female dancers. Kuchipudi in this regard went through an interesting transformation over the years.

Origin of Kuchipudi – Involvement of Men in Kuchipudi

There are several papers already presented, published and discussed the origin of Kuchipudi over the years and its evolution as a male tradition and classical dance form. I'll only touch up on this briefly in today's paper presentation. Dance in South India has been practiced since time immemorial. Kuchipudi has taken its name from the village Kuchipudi where the male Brahmin practitioners of Kuchipudi resided. While there was a parallel structure of temple dancers and devadasi dancers that later evolved into classical dance style Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, as know in the 18th, 19th and mid-20th centuries originated as male tradition with precursor forms being pagati veshas, yakshaganas, yakshagana natakas which primarily focused on nataka or drama style of dancing. It is said that Siddhendra Yogi, the founder of Kuchipudi art form, once dreamt of Krishna dancing with his consorts Rukmini and Satyabhama and he ever since went upon a mission in search of dancers and in Kuchipudi village, every Brahmin family had to train one of their sons to learn dance-drama that included both male and female roles. It is

noteworthy that women of elite castes of the days were not allowed to be part of the dances per the social norm of those days, hence men playing female roles. There is also another reference that says, it is possibly because Siddhendra Yogi thought propitiation of god by men generates a different energy and brings a different approach to appease god as opposed to the delicate dancing of women. A reference of Rukmini Devi Arundale discussing the possibility of Kuchipudi being an adaptation of Bharatanatyam in its drama form at All India Dance Congress of 1958 in New Delhi, India is known. Although this is debatable in variety of different contexts, it certainly seems logical to agree that Kuchipudi, as we practice today, includes a solo repertoire that includes Javalis, Padams and Kalapams that find their historic roots in Devadasi dance style. An noteworthy revolutionary legend of the days, Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sharma after the Devadasi Abolition Act, created solo repertoire to create new jobs for devadasi and bring them back into the main stream. Only a few noteworthy personalities from Devadasi cult such as M. S. Subbalakshmi, renowned Karnatic classical singer had the fortune of joining the middle class women of social status of those days through her marriage but most others were treated unjustly in the days. Dr. Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sharma garu's honest, dedicated effort to bring such devadasis into the main stream performance art resulted in the inclusion of solo repertoire that includes Javalis, padams in Kuchipudi classical dance of today.

Anatomical and Emotional Differences between Genders

As a biotechnology graduate alongside of kuchipudi dance education, science and dance, body and art are inseparable in my mind and I believe it is very important for us to discuss some elements of human anatomy that allow us to better understand the evolution of Kuchipudi over time through the years. For a dance form that originated as a male tradition and later incorporated some of the female elements into the dance, Kuchipudi transcended genders over several decades from men to women to men and to both genders in today's world. It is part of my academic interest to understand these differences over time and how it influenced the Kuchipudi dance tradition.

The gender plays an important role in presenting any art form and can be put into multiple contexts – Strength, emotions, reliance/dependence in the social times and more. This is not

just important to understand from Indian dance perspective but from a world dance perspective as we see these elements in all the different types of dances - ballet, hip hop, Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Kathak, Georgian Folk, Australian Aboriginal, Bulgarian Folk, Flamenco; the list goes on and on.

It is very rarely we ever see a female dancer lifting a male although I found a single picture when I rigorously searched, it is a common practice for a male dancer to lift the female dancer. It has been a common feature that male dancer leads and female dancer follows in most ball room dancing owing to the height and strength of a male dancer in relation to the female dancer. This by no means presents the female dancer to be weak, this is only to say how the roles are developed based on their natural strength. Infact, Ballet, hip hop and Kuchipudi today demand a lot of physical strength in the way the dance forms evolved from both male and female dancers.

If we take one step further and look at the current social and sexual preferences such as same gender marriages, equality of men and women in the current days based on their physical and emotional strengths, we are now moving more in the direction of seeing some of the performances that illustrate equal strength in the performances. I feel that we, the millennial generation are now becoming part of the change or rather creating the change in the traditional mindset for good or bad. That could be a discussion that merits another paper on its own.

As presented in indian mythology, purusha (the man – Creator or Srishti or Creation) is the man and prakruti (the female – nature or bearer or supportive element) has defined the role for male dancer to be more tandava (aggressive style) while the female dancer to be more in lasya (delicate or graceful). In colloquial terms, I read this to interpret asking a man to dance like a man and woman to dance like a woman, Isn't what we are natural at?

But again with changing times, this is changing as well. In a recent study conducted in UK, amongst different age groups of men and women to measure the level of masculinity or femininity where older generations are defined as men and women over 65 and younger generation in the age range of 18-24, and everyone in between thereof. While 56% of the older

generation man claimed complete masculinity, only 2% of the younger generation men claimed complete masculinity. When same applied to female gender, 59% claimed complete femininity in the cohort of over 65 year olds, only 12% claimed complete femininity in the younger generation. This explains why the gender bias is naturally being eliminated in the current days. It is becoming a life changing truth that reflects in life styles with times to come.

What does this mean to us in dance – Most men in the olden days when danced in female roles or vice versa, usually exaggerated the expression to mock more of the gender they are not but in today's world this may balance more close to nature if the choice was made by the dancer.

Impact of Gender on Kuchipudi, a South Indian Classical Dance Form

Apart from all the bodily differences and emotional preferences that men and women in the society go through, Kuchipudi, as a dance form has an interesting evolutionary history in the context of gender. The original temple dancers prior to Kuchipudi were all female dancers that catered to Gods and later to the Kings of the days that presented effeminate and devotional or sensual dancers pertinent to the context respectively to appease their audience.

Bharatanatyam, has found its roots from temple dancers and devadasis hence there was not a gender conflict at the onset but later when men started dancing Bharatanatyam, we see distinction of gender in some cases and probably not in some other situations based on the performers. Unlike Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi dance originated as a male driven dance form with pagati veshas, yakshaganas and other dance dramas. During these days, men played both male and female roles in the dances. This is probably the reason why there is an exaggerated dramatization of the characters when a man performs the role of a female. Later on when the solo repertoire got added and societal norms changed where women became a significant part of the performance arts, the dancers were predominantly women. In these days, women played both male and female roles in the dance dramas. The transition of Kuchipudi from male dancers to female dancers and back to male dancers is an interesting and unique journey for this art form. It is but obvious to expect that the bodily and emotional quotients added their flavor through this journey of genders in Kuchipudi. Kuchipudi as opposed to several other classical Indian dance forms has very strong and intense movements, possibly can be attributed

to the male origin of this dance form in the form of dance dramas. When the solo repertoire and female dancers got added to the dance form, the lasya or delicate presentation got added to the dance form. Considering the earlier gurus or teachers are all male, the generation of female dancers that learnt from the male teachers presented the same vigor and energy in the dance as the male dancers. Also possibly carried the exaggerated feminine movements that males dancers introduced into dance form. My detailed research will include exploring this aspect of Kuchipudi as a part of Indian classical dance forms and in relation to world dances.

Conclusion

Kuchipudi, a South Indian classical dance form originated as a male tradition and later incorporated female traditions and as practiced currently by both men and women went through several changes through course of time. My research paper focuses on understanding these differences from a gender perspective on how the male driven tradition at its inception influenced the dance form and also broadly putting a perspective of male dancers around the gender based attributes such as strength, emotion, body anatomy, quotient of masculinity/femininity in an artist and its impact on Kuchipudi art form.

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26. *Dance: the Human Body as a Dynamic Motion System* Karl Grammer*, Elisabeth Oberzaucher*, Iris Holzleitner* and Silke Atmaca** * Department of Anthropology, Faculty of Life Sciences, University of Vienna, Althanstrasse 14, A-1090 Vienna, Austria {karl.grammer, elisabeth.oberzaucher, iris.holzleitner}@univie.ac.at ** Max Planck Institute for Human Cognitive and Brain Sciences, P.O. box 500355, 04303 Leipzig, Germany atmaca@cbs.mpg.de