The Socio-Political Implications of the 20th Century Narratives on Indian Dances

SINDHUJA SURYADEVARA[1]

Abstract: From mentions of dance in treatises as old as 2nd century to regional variations around 13th century to the 20th century - dance has travelled, traversed and evolved. When the agenda of Nationalism was in vogue during pre and post-independence periods, there was a necessity to produce something unique to the nation and make a point about its rich heritage. Dance was one effective medium that served as a cultural symbol. This very notion modified the course of dance, its form and structure. The ancient practices were modified and tailor-made to suit agendas of the time and popular choices. This paper attempts to understand this phenomenon of how the socio-political ideologies have affected the Indian classical dances. The focus would be on the political affiliations specific to the Kūcipūḍi form of dance.

Key Words: Classical, Kūcipūḍi, Nationalism, Culture, Tradition, Identity

Introduction

There are mentions of dancing traditions in India in texts, treatises and epics as old as 4th century, especially in Sanskrit. Around the 13th century manuscripts and manuals were available in regional languages. Later foreign invasions on the nation have had a major impact on arts. Important amongst those is the Colonial chapter. One of the oft-repeated yet crucial in the history of Indian arts is the Nationalist period, wherein arts were revived or re-structured.

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1. *Department of Dance, University of Hyderabad, India. sindhuja@uohyd.ac.in.*

As Kapila Vatsyayan expresses about the British rule- that had the most profound and complex implications on the ecosystem of nation "The generation which went to the schools and colleges founded by the British in India in the 19th century, was thus isolated from the art traditions of the country."[2]

Ahistorical perceptions due to colonization was prevalent and Indian arts were portrayed as being esoteric or in a precarious position[3]. Are we still dwelling in the colonial or post-colonial sensibilities in looking at an art that is rooted in a different cultural entity? Arts are but products of contemporary circumstances, they reflect the societal tastes, accumulated palates and collective experiences. While there are many faces and facets for the Colonial-Nationalist debate, select aspects are considered for the study on dance. Major revolutions in arts sphere came up during the Nationalist period (late 1800s to post independence). It is important to understand few standpoints of that time[4]:

▪ To project Indian-ness in terms of culture, something unique, ancient and continuous.

▪ Appealing to Western sensibilities yet rooted in Indian culture – A conscious attempt to redefine and receive a global recognition.

▪ Religious and Political affiliations.

▪ Growth of a dominant elite section of people who exerted influence on different spheres of life.

2. Kapila Vatsyayan, *Indian Classical Dance*, Revised ed (New Delhi: Publications Division, 2015), 7.

3. Idea substantiated in: Nandikesvara, *The Mirror of Gesture. Being the Abhinaya Darpana of Nandikesvara*, trans. Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gopala Krishnayya Duggirala (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1917), 12.

4. See John Zavos, *Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); John McLead, *Beginning Postcolonialism.* (New Delhi: Viva Books, 2010).

Dance as cultural symbol:

National identity is a form of identification with representations of shared experiences and history. These are told through stories, literature, popular culture and media.[5]

During the Nationalist period, a necessity to produce something unique of the nation and make a point about its rich heritage sprung up. An Indian identity had to be established. There are two ways of showcasing, one being the materialistic – as in the fabric, food, etc., and the other being the visible yet intangible heritage.

Dance acted as one those- an imaginative credential marker of a state. Nationalist ideologies were spread by taking religious oriented forms like dance. The whole concept of Nationalism is itself based on religion- Hinduism in this case and dance certainly being religious based was thus a natural preference for propaganda[6]. The history is shrouded by the nationalist narrative be it the case of Sadir transforming to Bharatanāṭyaṁ or the Classical status aspired by all forms of dances. Scholars like Davesh Soneji comment that the "social history" is sidelined and all that remains widespread is the fabricated history[7]. "…Nationalism arose by laying its claim on revived traditions, by appropriating classical texts and traditions of science as the heritage of the nation."[8]

Sanskritisation was another fragment of the Nationalist agenda[9]. Everything had to be associated with a pan Indian, Sanskrit connotation - Sanskrit being the bandwagon of the elite. Davesh opines cultural nationalism

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5. Chris Barker, *Cultural Studies: Theory and Practice* (London: SAGE Publications, 2008), 253.

6. Zavos, *Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India*, 213.

7. Davesh Soneji (Scholar), in discussion with the author, February 2019.

8. Matthew Harp Allen, "Standardize, Classicize, and Nationalize: The Scientific Work of the Music Academy of Madras, 1930-53," in *Performing Pasts*, ed. Indira Viswanathan Peterson and Davesh Soneji (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), 90.

9. On Sanskritization, see Milton Singer, *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 261.

is about the upper class and upper caste[10]. The subaltern voices were pushed down. The whole notion of classical itself is a nationalist project. While there is no exact translation for "Classical" in Indian languages, *śāstrīya* comes close - it means adherence to *śāstra* - treatises. Earlier while *mārgi* and *deśi* were mentioned in treatises there was nothing called classical[11]. The hereditary arts were slanted to become founded on Sanskrit treatises.

The first argument or the case for 'Classical' arose when the states of India were divided on linguistic basis post- independence. The separation of states itself is perceptibly due to political reasons. A broad definition in this case suggests that the dance styles following Natyasastra are identified as classical. While the nation as a whole sought for an identity- the states pursued at the subsequent level. So, on one hand the state is built on nation and at the other end of the spectrum it is grounded on the international realigning of thoughts occurring at that period.

"Inspired by the enlightenment project of modernism, the revivalists looking for cultural roots or heritage were involved in the fundamental project of nation-building."[12]

The concepts of Hinduism, Nationalism and the whole gamut of being was as per the Orientalist perceptions[13]. While the western model or specifically British model of education altered the ethos and understanding of Indian culture, it is the same education that stirred and modelled the thought processes. A need to systemize everything and a spiritual association was evident. This is best demonstrated in the case of Sadir where the authentic *śṛṇgāra* (the sentiment of erotic/love) based content is majorly replaced with *bhakti* (devotion) dominant matter in its later day rechristened version- Bharatanāṭyaṁ.

As Tapati Guha Thakurta (1992) asserts the colonial intrusion in arts sphere transformed the training and patronage patterns; Colonialism imposed

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10. Davesh Soneji (Scholar), in discussion with the author, February 2019.
11. *mārgi* could be understood as the high and idealized path, with a definite structure whereas *deśi* is the provincial, probably adapting the *mārga* procedures into established regional practices.
12. Chandreyee Niyogi, *Reorienting Orientalism* (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2006), 91.
13. Zavos, *Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India*.

and Nationalism appropriated and resulted in emergence of a legitimate National art. While she writes that about art, the same can be adapted to dances.

"The revivalist and reconstructive movement of Indian classical dance cannot be viewed outside the context of the formation of national ideology in India."[14]

The first jolt to the Indian dances was removing its identity from the actual torchbearers of the form- the *devadāsi*s and alienating the social history[15]. This phase of re-scripting history resulted in attaining at what are accepted as Dialogical truths[16].

Kūcipūḍi and Politics:

> *Kuchipudi dance form, both in its origins and its transformation over the last 100 years, is embedded in the socio-cultural milieu of the Andhra region and in the larger politico-cultural context of the Indian performing arts.* [17]

While the nationalist ideological implications are more pronounced, articulate and oft-spoken about in the legend of Bharatanāṭyaṁ[18], it is at another level and sort in the case of Kūcipūḍi. Kūcipūḍi, a now recognized Classical dance of India, shares the name from the village it hails- Kuchipudi located in the present-day Andhra Pradesh. It was practiced by itinerant Brahmin troupes who staged theatrical plays called the *kalāpam*s and *yakṣagāna*s from the acknowledged history.

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14. Pallabi Chakravorty, "From Interculturalism to Historicism: Reflections on Classical Indian Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 32, no. 2 (2000): 110, https://doi.org/10.2307/1477983.
15. *devadāsi* literally means god's servant. The *devadāsi*s were in service of God, dedicated to temples.
16. Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction - Theory and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2002), 76.
17. Rajyalakshmi Seth, "Development of Kuchipudi Dance in the Context of 20th Century Dance Renaissance in India," *Research Process* 2, no. 1 (2014): 62.
18. Janet O'Shea, "'Traditional' Indian Dance and the Making of Interpretive Communities," *Asian Theatre Journal* 15, no. 1 (1998): 45, https://doi.org/10.2307/1124098.

Kūcipūḍi practitioners are alleged be socially motivated and included nuggets from the society and current affairs, intelligently weaving into their dialogue and dance in either *kalāpam*s/*yakṣagāna*s that they performed. A popular recorded incident of this is that of the "Machupalli Kaifiyath"[19]. During the 16th century, it was the Vijayanagara rule that prevailed upon the present Andhra region. A local chieftain Sammeta Guruvaraju humiliated women and the ruler was unaware of this. So, the *Bhāgavatar*s danced his atrocities in front of the ruler resulting in the chieftain being punished and thus putting an end to the atrocities. Other than that, during the freedom struggle there are evidences for special productions that came up[20]. Instances of *Bhāgavatar*s staging "Shimla Bhagavatam" about the partition of India and Pakistan and artists involved in the freedom struggle are recorded[21].

The rulers- kings or later day zamindar were the patrons for arts. In fact, the political conditions impacted the art and practitioners so much that post the fall of Vijayanagara empire, few families from Kuchipudi have migrated to Tamil Nadu and the Bhāgavata Mela Nāṭakaṁ is an off-shoot of that tribe[22]. There is no much documented evidence about the circumstances of Kūcipūḍi during British rule, however there are references to the form and its substance in the early 20th century. Post-independence, the newly formed Indian Government has initiated Sangeet Natak Akademi (SNA) to support and patronize the music and dance. The SNA has organized national seminar in 1958 on dance by when Kūcipūḍi was not recognized as classical.

Many believed, and as a matter of fact Kūcipūḍi was called Kūcipūḍi Bharataṁ[23], that the form was prevalent as a category of Bharatanāṭyaṁ,

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19. Chinta Ramanatham, "Kuchipudi Natya Charitra Putalu," in *IKDF Special Issue*, ed. T. Udayavarlu (Hyderabad: AP Samskrutika Mandali, 2012), 16–17.

20. The performers narrating the story of Lord Krishna from the epic *Bhagavatam* were called *Bhāgavatar*s. Kuchipudi Brahmins mostly performed these stories and hence called Kuchipudi *Bhāgavatar*s

21. Jonnalagadda Anuradha, Kuchipudi (lecture, University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad, India, October 25, 2011)

22. Bhāgavata Mela Nāṭakaṁ is a theatrical performance based in Melattur, Tamil Nadu similar to Kūcipūḍi.

23. Rumya S. Putcha, "Between History and Historiography: The Origins of Classical Kuchipudi Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3 (December 25, 2013): 91–110, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767713000260.

albeit with differences. However, when Sadir became Bharatanāṭyaṁ and spread wide becoming synonymous as the dance of India, the Kūcipūḍi or Telugu counterparts would've wanted a form to depict them as well. And Kuchipudi being situated in the hotbed of Andhra and the practitioners being learned men as well as from the Brahmin caste, this particular form was given preference as opposed to the many other dance styles practiced by different sects.

> in case of Kuchipudi, changes were partly a response to national pressure and agendas. This was the period when Andhra was slowly developing a separate political identity based on regional linguistic consideration. Kuchipudi became all important symbol of Telugu aspirations for a separate and distinct culture identity. [24]

An interesting anecdote that shows the power play occurred during 1958. Yamini Krishnamurty, a famed dancer was forbidden to perform Kūcipūḍi at the National Science Congress terming that the dance was folk in nature and thus, not eligible. Yamini in correspondence with the then Vice President of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishna succeeded to perform at the said event in front of the Prime Minister and other dignitaries[25]. Incidents like this would have given exposure to Kūcipūḍi at variant degrees. The following year at another seminar organized by the Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi, specifically for the purpose of showcasing and getting recognition to Kūcipūḍi, the purpose was achieved.

> Though the stated purpose for the 1959 Seminar was to establish Kuchipudi's Classicism, at its core, this event was primarily an exercise in establishing the authority of Andhra Pradesh and its state-level government organizations.[26]

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24. Seth, "Development of Kuchipudi Dance in the Context of 20th Century Dance Renaissance in India," 68.

25. T. Udayavarlu, "Yamini- Kuchipudi Nrityabhamini, Visvamohini," in *Sujanaranjani-Natyamanjari*, ed. J. Chennaih (Milpitas, CA: University of Silicon Andhra, 2014), 13.

26. Putcha, "Between History and Historiography: The Origins of Classical Kuchipudi Dance."

The Telugu clan needed an image, rather than a genuine bidding for an art to make an impression. The arguments centering around the "classicity" for Kūcipūḍi reinstate the cause for a Telugu identity. Multiple references by regional writers refer to a lack of a special state and thus a distinct representation or identity[27].

What was the pressing need to achieve a classical status? Was it for visibility of a profile by the Telugus, or the benefits derived out of the recognition or probably the respect associated to anything 'classical' then and now! So, the prerequisite was acceptance of state-government and getting legitimized as a classical, upright style. Classical is synonymous to respectable having a history, a structure unlike folk. The truth here is debatable as various scholars have done extensive work on the history have contrasting ideas. Nevertheless, it is pertinent to note that the 'constructed history' of Kūcipūḍi was out of the need of the day- to suit the contemporary sensibilities and to make it legitimate and iconic as a mantle of Telugus[28]. However as late as 1969, there is a lament that Kūcipūḍi dances impact is not realized by government[29]! The form later has received credit and is now spread across the globe. Nevertheless, from being a male-dominated dramatic art it is more practiced as a solo performance by women, irrespective of caste and creed. The reasons for this are multi-dimensional and beyond the scope of this paper.

Conclusion

While that is about Kūcipūḍi in a specific approach, the *devadāsi* or *kalāvantula* dances - again belonging to the Telugu regions and having vast antiquity were revived by dancer -teachers Nataraja Ramakrishna (called it Āndhra nāṭyaṁ) and Swapna Sundari (named it Vilāsini nāṭyaṁ). Both lay a claim for theirs being authentic, however didn't succeed in attaining a classical status from government. Now that a new state is formed- Telangana

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27. This can be referred to in the multiple issues of Telugu magazine *Natyakala,* published by APSNA.

28. Aarudhra, "Kuchipudi - the Abode of Dance," in *IKDF Special Issue*, ed. T. Udayavarlu (Hyderabad: AP Samskrutika Mandali, 2012), 16–17.

29. Banda Kanakalingeswara Rao, "The Dance Tradition in Andhra," in *Kuchipudi Mahotsav '99*, ed. K. Subadra Murthy (Mumbay, 1999), 4.

after separation from Andhra Pradesh, the same debate appears to resurface with the Andhra's laying a claim for Kūcipūḍi as their dance and Telangana trying to promote Periṇi, a male oriented dance and rebuilt versions of Periṇi lāsyaṁ, a female equivalent of Periṇi[30]. Periṇi lāsyaṁ is under construction, if we may call it so, sewing into a rounded form with elements of classical, as guided by Nataraja Ramakrishna and spearheaded currently by dancer-teacher Kalakrishna. Periṇi is being showcased and promoted extensively as archetypal of Telangana state, though Kūcipūḍi and Bharatanāṭyaṁ lead in terms of practitioners in both the Telugu states. The future of the forms is unpredictable with so many elements being overlapped and borrowed from diverse arts. Ironically, Kūcipūḍi, Bharatanāṭyaṁ, Āndhra nāṭyaṁ, Vilāsini nāṭyaṁ and now Periṇi lāsyaṁ are all under the same canopy and often confused with one another owing to similarities in their origin, movement pattern and primarily being practiced by women of neighboring states-resulting in a shared culture and code. Yet, the overlying inkling to note is the continuous repetitive circle of identity, representation, and claim over a form which actually falls under the larger umbrella of political conjunctions.

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30. A form of regional dance variation that has mentions in 13th century treatise Nritta Ratnavali (written by JayaSenapati), reconstructed by Nataraja Ramakrishna.

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SINDHUJA SURYADEVARA *is a research scholar and practitioner of Kuchipudi. She received initial training from Smt. Madhavi, Smt. Padma Kalyan and Sri Vedantam Raghava and since 2005 is under the guidance of Dr. Yashoda Thakore. Sindhuja composes dance for compositions included in her repertoire (both solo and group presentational styles) aspiring to achieve a unique style, drawing inspiration from readings/texts and other dances.*