UNIT 8 KUCHIPUDI

Structure

8.1 Introduction
8.2 Objectives
8.3 Kuchipudi – the dance drama
8.4 Brief history of Kuchipudi
8.5 The influence of Vaishnavism and the Bhagvat Purana.
8.6 Technique
  8.6.1 Nritta
  8.6.2 Nritya
8.7 Music in Kuchipudi
8.8 Repertoire
8.9 Some Wellknown Exponents and Performers
8.10 Self Assessment Questions

8.1 INTRODUCTION

It is a totally different experience to witness a Kuchipudi performance than any other classical dance style. You must have noticed that in all the other six styles that you have been introduced, the vaachika abhinaya has been rendered by the singers who accompany the dancers. In very exceptional instances like in Kathakali certain characters emit some specified sounds or in Kathak where the dancer recites the bols (padhant) the dancer does not speak. Of course, you might have that some dancers are accomplished singers and sing the song during the nritya portions but there is always an accompanist. In any case in no dance style the dancers indulge in speaking dialogues just as in a drama.

But in Kuchipudi you find the dancers breaking into spoken dialogues in between dance sequences.

One can classify Kuchipudi as a “dance-drama”. It is from the southern state of Andhra Pradesh. It is one of the oldest performing arts from this region. Earlier it was also known as Kuchipudi Bhagavatam, Kuchipudi Yakshaganam and Kuchipudi Bharatam. Until a few decades ago the enactment of both, the male as well as female roles, was done solely by male dancers. In this aspect it resembles the other dance-drama style of the south – Kathakali.

In many respects Kuchipudi is quite unique. It is very sprightly and projects a very racy tempo for performance. It is very exhilarating to watch Kuchipudi with its vigorous and vibrant gaps and bhramaris (circular movements). Its footwork is scintillating and the performance exudes joyousness; yet it is very lyrical. It is very bold and sensuous with flashing eye movements. The world of the pining of separated naayaka and naayikaa (the lovers) is not for Kuchipudi. In its technique one can find the elements of its early folk origins.

A major characteristic is its strict adherence to the precepts of the Natyashastra in the articulation of all the four abhinayas. And like in Kathakali, Kuchipudi also uses the traditional curtain- Yavanikaa – for the introduction of the characters.
8.2 OBJECTIVES

After studying this unit you should be able to:

- fully appreciate the relevance of the Natyashastra to dance;
- appreciate the influence of vaishnavism on the country in general and the Andhra land in particular; and
- be able to distinguish Kuchipudi from its neighbor Bharatanatyam though both have similarities of the structure, music and ethos.

8.3 KUCHIPUDI – THE DANCE DRAMA

We have seen that the Natyashastra is considered to be the fifth veda. It is a tradition or a system that was intended to regulate the majority of facets that appear in a stage performance. In the chapter on the purvatanga vidhi (the preliminaries of a play) the religions rituals that must be performed are given in great detail. It prescribes the consecration of the stage by sprinkling of holy water the worship of the jarjara – (the sacred staff of Indra) dancing gestured movements while performing these veneration,
even the decoration of the stage with coloured powders and the lighting of the sacred lamps. These prescribed rituals set the pace for the later performance.

Here the role of the *sutradhaara* (literally meaning the conductor) becomes very important. It is the *sutradhaara*’s duty to lead the preliminary rituals, then introduce the story of the play to the audience as also introduce the various characters. He also explains the philosophical or spiritual content, if any, in the play.

The Kuchipudi presentation very closely follows the Natyashatra. After the preliminary salutations to Lord Ganapati, the *sutradhaara* in Kuchipudi enters the stage with his curved stick known as *Kutilaka* (*jarara* of the Natyashastra). After reciting a prayer in praise of the goddess Amba and the *guru vandanaa* the *sutradhaara* narrates the story of the dance-drama that is to follow. He also introduces the characters in the play. Each dancer is introduced with an introduction called the *pravesha daru* wherein he/she reveals his/her identity and the purpose of their participation in the dance-drama. Many of the characters enter hidden by the curtain *yavanikaa* which is held by two members of the troupe. Usually the feet of the dancer are seen and the manner of stepping or the rhythmic patterns executed by the feet reveal the mood and attitude of the character being enacted.

A very distinguishing feature of the Kuchipudi dance-drama is the importance of the braid (the plait of Satyabhama, the consort of Krishna). The braid consists of several parts linked by a black thread and is said to represent the universe. The philosophical meaning is that Satyabhama represents the mortal human being — the *jeeva*, the soul, to which even the universe becomes an appendage. Satyabhama also engages in a conversation with her *sakhi* Madhavi — the role sometimes taken by the *sutradhaara* himself.

This is Kuchipudi — the total theatre.

### 8.4 A BRIEF HISTORY OF KUCHIPUDI

Kuchipudi originated and developed in a village by the same name in the Krishna district of Andhra Pradesh. The origin and roots of Andhra’s long dance tradition can be traced to the depictions available in the ancient temples and Buddhist excavations of Nagarjunakonda, Amaravati etc. Proof of a strong dancing tradition in the then are called Andhra rules by the Satavahanas which is also available in the depictions in the world famous Ellora and Ajanta cave sanctuaries which were in the Andhra kingdom. Down the centuries various dynasties ruled over this vast area after the fall of the Satavahana empire. Each dynasty seems to have had kings who were lovers of the art and who encouraged and patronised dance.

There is a direct mention of Kuchipudi dance in the Machupalli Kaifiyat of 1505 A.D. who had helped Kuchipudi artistes.

In 1509 the great king Krishnadevaraya ascended the throne of the Vijayanagara empire who gave a great patronage to the Kuchipudi artistes.

Traditionally the high caste vaishnava Brahmans performed this dance and they made it their vocation. It is they who kept this art alive. The Nawab of Golkonda witnessed their art in the 17th century and donated villages to these Brahmans for their upkeep.

There were other plays popular in this region such as *Veedhinatakam*, *Yakshagana* and *Bhagvatam*. *Kuchipudi Yakshaganam* which also followed this dance-drama tradition. But the other were spontaneous street plays. It is *Siddhendra Yogi*, who
brought in the elements of the Natyashastra and laid down the method of performing Kuchipudi. He also brought in the graceful elements of the dance of the devadasis. He persuaded young Brahmin boys to learn this female graceful dance and take part in the Kuchipudi dramas.

Siddhendra’s guru Tirtha Narayana Yati wrote the Krishna Leela Tarangini in the form of musical opera in which also the elements of dance predominated.

Later this tradition branched into two sub-groups – Natyamela and Nattuvamela. The Nattuvamela is performed by women dancers. Their style is more subtle and belongs to Shuddh Laasya (feminine grace) which is steeped in shringaara rasa. Natyamela is performed by men who enact both male and female roles.

In the past three to four decades, the Kuchipudi base has been broadened by the addition of solo items which strictly adhere to the prescribed tenets.

8.5 THE INFLUENCE OF VAISHNAVISM AND THE BHAGVAT PURAANA

Between the 6th and the 10th centuries A.D. India saw the phenomenal upsurge in personalised devotion to God in the form of bhakti. With jnana and karma, bhakti formed the third maarga or path to achieve moksha, the absolute release. Bhakti maarga extols and achieves this spiritual union with God through pure love leading to a great yearning.

In south India too this maarga caught the imagination of the masses. There arose an order of yogis who were of the conviction that the best way to express bhakti was through the combined arts of music, dance and drama. Thus they initiated a tradition whereby the bhakta began to approach his God by singing, dancing and acting.

The basic principle is extollation of the virtues and great deeps of Lord Vishnu and it follows the Maha Bhagavatam. In Kuchipudi traditionally no woman is allowed to take part and the female roles are enacted by nubile Brahmin boys. It is also a composite art in the sense that different actors enact different roles but no art can be static. In the past three or four decades also items have been created and are being performed.

The same tradition gave rise to a similar form of dance-drama called Bhagvat Mela Natakam in the adjoining state of Tamil Nadu.

Both these arts have the sentiment of loving devotion to God permeating every facet of their technique. These dance-dramas helped to arouse in the minds of the people a great consciousness of God’s greatness.

8.6 TECHNIQUE

The technique of Kuchipudi exhibits a fine balance between nritta, nritya and naatya elements, the last preponderating in the vaachika abhinaya. Thus the Kuchipudi actor/dancer not only sings his pieces and dances to them but also himself speaks the dialogues.

It must be mentioned here that though Kuchipudi is a dance-drama, there are some items which can be and are performed as solo items.

8.6.1 Nritta

The nritta is made up, as in Bharatanatyam of adavus. Since Kuchipudi is a dance-drama the nritta sequences or even items are used to decorate the dramatic sequences
of the play. The *nritta* still retains some elements of its original rustic flavour and so has quicksilver jumps and glides in its performances. Very naturally the rhythmic syllables — *sollus* — also must have the same qualities and there is created a bubbling confluence of recited *Sollus* and vivacious dancing resulting in an audio-visual cascade. The *adavus* for men and women are performed in distinctly different manner, highlighting the clear demarcation between *taandava* and *laasya*.

### 8.6.2 Nritya

The *nritya* is made up chiefly of items like *shabdam*, *shlokam* and *padam*. Out of these, traditionally, the *shlokam* is performed sitting down. Like Bharata Natyam the *padams* are devotional love songs, the *padams* written by the great composer Kshetrajan being most popular. Other compositions which are popular for solo expressional presentation are *kritis* of the saint-poet Tyagaraja.

Siddhendra Yogi has composed the most famous dance-drama known as *Paarijaatapaharanam* for Kuchipudi. This is more commonly known as *Bhamaakalapam* which has an elaborate treatment of the character of Satyabhama, one of Krishna's consorts. This play is a masterpiece and is most popular for presentation.

### 8.7 Music in Kuchipudi

The traditional classical music of South India - *Carnatic* music - is used in Kuchipudi as well since it is a dance style from a southern state. Thus it is set to the established *raagas* and *taalas* of Carnatic music. Since Kuchipudi hails from Andhra Pradesh most of the lyrics are in Telugu; at the same time Sanskrit, the language of Natyashastra, is also extensively relied upon.

Since *vaachika abhinaya* forms an essential part of the style, the dancers usually are adept at singing and reciting the *taala* patterns.

The *taala* system is the same employing the traditional *septa taalas* (seven basic rhythm cycles) and *pancha jaatis* (five time beats).

The instruments are the *mridangam* (drum), violin, flute, *ghatam*. The *sutradhaara* usually plays upon the *taalams* while accompanying the dance passages.

### 8.8 Repertoire

Until about the 18th century A.D. the *Bhamaakalapam* was the only popular presentation for the Kuchipudi dancers. Then one more *kalaapam* in the form of *Gollakalaapam* is in the form of a dialogue between the *golla* (cowherdess) and a Brahmin priest. It is a satire with a strong social message. The popular dance dramas of this era are *Prahlaada charitam*, *Ushaa Parinayam*, *Mohini Rukmaangada*, *Harishchandra*, *Raama Naatakam* and *Rukmini Kalyaanam*.

Subsequently *shabdam*, which were *nritya* items, were added. They are compositions of rhythmic character which convey a story and can be performed as solo items.

Other very popular items are the *asthapadis* from the *Geetagovinda* of poet Jayadeva.

*Tarangam* (literally meaning waves) are very popular. In one of the *tarangams* the dancer dances on the rim of a plate. Similar to the Bharata Natyam repertoire, *Pada varnams*, *Padams*, *Jaavalis*, *Keertanas*, *Jatisvaram*, *Tillaanaa*, *Sholam* are the other items in the Kuchipudi repertoire.
8.9 SOME WELLKNOWN EXPONENTS AND PERFORMERS


8.10 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

1. Fill in the blank spaces in the following statements using the words given below:
   (racy tempo, story, female roles, vigorous, preliminary rituals, four, vaishnavism, vibrant, abhinayas, men, strong, sutradhaara)
   a) Kuchipudi is a Total Theatre because it has all the ________ ________.
   b) A significant aspect of Kuchipudi is that traditionally ________ perform the ________ as well.
   c) Present day Kuchipudi is developed under the ________ influence of ________.
   d) Technique of Kuchipudi reflects very ________ and has ________ and ________ leaps.
   e) It is ________ duty to lead the ________ and introduce the ________.

2. How is Kuchipudi different from the other dance styles – answer briefly.

3. Write the salient features of the Kuchipudi repertoire.

Answers:

1. a) four, abhinayas.
   b) men, female roles
   c) strong, vaishnavism
   d) racy tempo, vigorous, vibrant
   e) sutradhara’s, preliminary, rituals, story.

2. Kuchipudi has the unique quality of utilising all the four abhinayas which is not the case with the other dance styles. It also has a special feature in the sutradhara which character is not present in the other dance styles. Kuchipudi is basically racy and sprightly, scintillating and joyous. It does not deal too much with the theme of the separated lovers.

3. In the earlier period of its development, up to about the 18th century, Bhamakalapam was the only popular presentation. Later the Gollakalapam was added to the repertoire. There were other popular dance dramas like Prahlada Charitam, Usha Parinayam, Mohini Rukmangada, Rama Natakam, Rukmini Kalyanam etc.

Subsequently shabdam were added which could be performed as solo items.

The other items are ashtapadis from the Geetagovinda, Tarangam, Pada Varnams, Padams, Javalis, Keertanams, Jatisvaram, Tillana, Slokam.