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Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the term “kuchipudi” refers to a style of dance, a South Indian classical genre which, to the untrained eye, is indistinguishable from its better-known cousin, bharatanatyam. After India achieved Independence from the British in 1947, kuchipudi came to be known as a dance style synonymous with the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh. Kuchipudi’s metonymic status reveals a broader logic of linguistic, geographically grounded identitarianism; indeed, the dance known today as kuchipudi is said to hail from a physical place called Kuchipudi, an otherwise nondescript farming village located about fifty kilometres southeast of Vijayawada in central Andhra Pradesh (see figure 1).

Over the past sixty years, the standard narrative about kuchipudi circulated in government publications and, more recently, in Incredible India tourism campaigns,

1. I have chosen to forgo using the diacritical transliteration of kūcipūḍi throughout the article, as is the custom in many English publications on the subject.
2. Research in New Delhi, Chennai, and Kuchipudi from 2008 to 2009 was funded by generous support from the United States Department of Education Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad Programme. I am grateful to Anuradha Jonnalagadda for her assistance and mentorship in the collection of much of the data presented here and would like to thank Davesh Soneji, Philip Bohlman, Kaley Mason, Ameera Nimjee, Kati Szego, Rebecca Draisey-Collishaw, and two anonymous reviewers for careful comments and suggestions on earlier versions of this essay. I would also like to particularly thank Vasanta Lakshmi Putcha for her assistance with and proofreading of the translations from Telugu to English.

Figure 1. Kuchipudi village in Andhra Pradesh, South India (produced by Ashley Quirke, 2015). (Source: ArcWorld Supplement, created using ArcGIS® software by Esri. Copyright © Esri. All rights reserved).
has relied heavily upon this understanding of expressive culture as both primordial and historically continuous:

Kuchelapuram is a small village in Andhra Pradesh. The descendants of 300 [Telugu] Brahmin families live here to continue a tradition that dictates that only men may dance. The village and the land are gifts from the Nawab of Golconda… in 1675, after witnessing a performance of a Kuchipudi dance-drama by migrant Brahmins. Since then, every Brahmin family of the village ritually offers at least one male member to be trained as an actor-dancer. The name of the village changed to Kuchipudi as time passed and its dance-drama also acquired this name. (Mansingh 2007:82)

Despite its purportedly long and exclusive tradition of training Brahmin men, the Kuchipudi demonstration at the first All-India Dance Seminar in 1958 was not presented by a Brahmin male dancer from the village in the dance-drama tradition; rather, it featured a lecture by a Telugu advocate-cum-scholar, Vissa Appa Rao, including a demonstration by a young woman named Maranganti Kanchanamala (Putcha 2013). Neither of these representatives was from the village of Kuchipudi or related to the hereditary dancing families living there. Kanchanamala, a student of Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry (1886–1956), did not perform a traditional number, such as an excerpt from a dance-drama, but rather a potpourri of pieces that were openly criticized by the experts in the room as bearing no relation to the known Kuchipudi repertoire.

Based on even the narrowest interpretations of gender and performance cultures in early twentieth-century South India, it is clear that the items Kanchanamala presented in 1958 belonged to the broader female dance traditions of Andhra, not to the men of Kuchipudi. Given this contradiction, why did Vissa Appa Rao historicize Kuchipudi village and its dance—at the very same seminar where Kanchanamala presented these items—as an exclusively male, high-caste tradition? This article analyses the paradox of the historical moment Appa Rao and Kanchanamala represent and connects the rhetorical strategies therein to discourses on history, tourism, and performance in South India that have come since.

In order to engage with the dissonance on display at the 1958 seminar, over the course of this article I analyse kuchipudi’s claims to historicity—a process

3. Incredible !ndia is a tourism programme initiated in 2002 under the Ministry of Tourism. The marketing and advertising campaign for this programme features exoticized and romanticized photos of Indian cultural icons as well as Indian landscapes. As stated by its founders on the Incredible !ndia campaign website, “The primary objective of this branding exercise was to create a distinct identity for the country…and establish India as a high-end tourist destination” (Incredible !ndia Campaign 2015).
4. The All-India Dance Seminar was organized under a branch of the Ministry of Culture known as the Sangeet Natak Akademi (Music Drama Academy).
that I refer to as mythopoetics. Mythopoetics, literally myth-making, refers to the social processes by which certain narratives of fact and/or fiction have fused as history and, in doing so, have come to buttress broader narratives of dance and identity across South Asia.\footnote{Theorized by Henri and Henriette Frankfort (1977) in their work on ancient Egypt, there existed a mythopoeic stage before modernity in which humanity did not think in terms of universal empirical truths; instead, humans saw each event as an act of will or as part of a personal narrative or construction.} For my purposes, mythopoetics provide an agentive counterpoint to the kinds of western, liberal feminist, and postmodern analyses that have defined much of the scholarship on dance in India.\footnote{See, for example, Allen (1997), Chakravorty (2008), Gaston (1996), Maciszewski (1998, 2006, 2007), Meduri (1988, 1996), O’Shea (2005, 2006, 2007), Putcha (2013), Srinivasan (1984, 1985), and Walker (2004, 2014).} Indeed, a central intervention of this work functions as an answer to the charge to identify “the power in the story” (Trouillot 1995:1). As a way of accounting for the epistemological power that has shaped much of the way Indian dance history has been written in the West, I rely on the concept of mythopoetics throughout this article to help me carve out a space where the half-truths and silences of kuchipudi’s past can and do live uncomfortably with its present.

In this article I pay particular attention to the ways in which a physical place, in this case Kuchipudi village, is circumscribed by postcolonial ontologies of gender, as well as caste. Amrit Srinivasan’s work from the early 1980s (1984, 1985) on the now infamous devadāsī (often understood as a courtesan or hereditary female performer), has promulgated a narrative of Indian music and dance as the disenfranchisement and eradication of the courtesan by high-caste middle-class Hindus who were often nationalists and/or men.\footnote{Often referred to as the anti-nauteh (anti-dance) movement, much of this literature has focused on legislation passed in the early twentieth century that banned public female dance. In this article I will use courtesan and hereditary female performer interchangeably.} From north (e.g., Qureshi 2001; Walker 2004) to south (e.g., Allen 1997; Subramanian 2006) and east (e.g., Banerji 2010; Sikand 2010) to west (e.g., Bakhle 2005), this story of appropriation, misogyny, and victimization has shaped the way we look at the history of South Asian performance art over the past thirty years. Taking my cue from critical transnational feminism and its commitment to “decolonizing” the categories of gender, race, and sexuality, in this article I disengage with the legacy of the fallen courtesan and the narratives that have effectively exoticized her racialized low-caste female victimhood.\footnote{See work by Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Swarr and Nagar (2010). Recent work by Davesh Soneji (2012) challenges the narrative of the extinct courtesan in South India. Similarly, Sachdeva (2008) problematizes the supposed decline of the hereditary female performance culture in North India, and Morcom (2013) exposes the shadowed life of the modern courtesan and the liminal, often sexualized, performance practices that have flourished despite the purported banning of the hereditary female performer and her lifestyle.}

In doing so I expand my view of kuchipudi history to consider alternative narratives of the early twentieth century, such as the biography of a Kuchipudi dancer/guru known as Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, a man whose contribution stands in contrast to much of the gender and caste politics that has
preoccupied the scholarship on Indian dance. Sastry remains a liminal figure in kuchipudi history, primarily because he did what many deny ever doing in Kuchipudi village: he learned from, danced with, and taught women from erstwhile courtesan communities. His avowedly cosmopolitan style of kuchipudi, which incorporated pieces in languages such as Hindi and Marathi, speaks to a time before kuchipudi, bharatanatyam, kathak, and other regional styles were considered mutually exclusive. His biography complicates kuchipudi history, not least because the young woman whose dance was dismissed as “not kuchipudi” at the New Delhi seminar in 1958, Kanchanamala, was his student.

Reconciling the disparity of kuchipudi’s past with its present—in particular how we understand the shifting importance of caste and gender identity in the village and in its dance over the past century—means engaging with kuchipudi’s sometimes conflicting historical narrative(s) through the lens of mythopoetics. This perspective enables me to enter that elusive space where stories become history—a space ethnography often requires us to refer to as an, if not the, archive. In this regard, my approach bears the imprint of scholarship by Bruno Latour (1997) as well as Diana Taylor (2003), both of whom have written extensively on the way certain kinds of knowledge transcend the embodied to become the archive. Many who have studied dance in South Asia have struggled to adequately represent this tension between performance and history, a dichotomy Latour describes as the “distinction between what is real and what is constructed…between ontological questions…and epistemological questions.”

To be sure, this tension has defined a generation of scholarship on South Asian performance cultures in the wake of the new musicology and its commitment to subjectivist postmodern frameworks. Throughout this article I oscillate between the real and constructed—the space of mythopoetics—by way of narratives about Kuchipudi village and Sastry’s biography. Beyond a desire to temper the patronizing tone of much of the scholarship on women who dance(d) in India, this approach also serves a very personal purpose: it allows me, in 2015, to call myself an ethnographer as well as a kuchipudi dancer in 2015 without denying either the ineluctable fissures in the narrative or the diasporic distance and intersectional privilege that makes such a perspective possible.

Kuchipudi dance | Kuchipudi village

Physically situated histories, like those cited in the Incredible India campaign, function as authenticating narratives in much of the scholarship on kuchipudi

11. For example, Babiracki (2008:2) once referred to the act of interpretation with such tension as “multiplicity.”
12. Kirin Narayan (1993) refers to the categories of the “native” and “regular” anthropologist as ways of accounting for racial sameness or difference in anthropological inquiry. In many ways, her question “how native is the native?” is exactly the kind of query that transnational feminism has sought to transcend. Crenshaw (1991) is the foundational text for theories of intersectionality, especially within the American academy. I see intersectionality and transnational feminism as parallel conversations in many ways and thus equally productive for my purposes throughout this article.
dance. The earliest reference that links a place called Kuchipudi to a dance tradition is a never-seen though oft-referenced document known as the *Machupalli Kaifiyat* (Jonnalagadda 1996:37; Kothari 2001:31; Soneji 2004:164). In most accounts, the *Kaifiyat* is said to describe an episode in 1502 wherein a group of Kuchipudi bhāgavatulu (literally, men from Kuchipudi who perform stories from the *Bhāgavatam*) performed at the Vijayanagara court for King Veera Narasimharaya (r. 1503–1505). During their performance, these men re-enacted a scene they had witnessed, in order to bring the misdeeds of a local chieftain to the King’s attention. The *Kaifiyat* is often referenced by kuchipudi historians to prove the existence of a group of well-known, socially conscious, and morally upstanding male performers connected to a place called Kuchipudi. For example, in a lecture on kuchipudi dance aired on All-India Radio on 19 May 1954, Vissa Appa Rao opens with a reference to the *Kaifiyat* and suggests that “the king, who had already heard of their [the bhāgavatulu’s] fame, ordered a performance, which he attended along with the queen and other members of the royal family” (Appa Rao 1955:16). Despite its ubiquitous appearance in narratives of kuchipudi’s history, no one either living or dead has seen the *Kaifiyat* in facsimile or otherwise, nor has anyone been able to quote the document directly.

The earliest authenticated evidence of a dance tradition associated with the village of Kuchipudi in the Krishna district is dated almost two hundred years later, during the rule of Nizam Ali Khan (r. 1762–1803). According to Prof. Anuradha Jonnalagadda, a kuchipudi dancer and scholar at the University of Hyderabad, a land partition deed does in fact exist, dated 24 August 1763, detailing a property rights dispute among several Brahmin families living in Kuchipudi village. Subsequently, the Brahmins of Kuchipudi filed a petition to challenge a tax being assessed on their property. The response to their petition, dated 17 April 1795, which I obtained in photocopy form from Prof. Jonnalagadda, is written in cursive English script and reads as follows:

The Brahmins of Koochepoody represent that their ancestors enjoyed the village as aghraharam (religious hamlet). That the former sanuds (land grand documents) are in their possession. Requests that the collector will be pleased to renew them. The Brahmins ordered to produce the sanuds. (As quoted in Jonnalagadda 1996:183)

During my time in the field, I was often told to refer to these sanuds (land grant documents), which were rumoured to have been inscribed on copper plates in 1675 by the Nawab of Golconda, whenever I asked about the history of the village. From what I could ascertain, however, no one had these plates in their possession or had ever actually seen them.

By this point in my fieldwork, I had come to understand the documents that testified to kuchipudi’s past as a kind of “Holy Grail” in South Indian dance history and became fixated on obtaining reliable physical evidence. Prof. Jonnalagadda thus directed me to yet another document that might aid in my search: an appeal

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13. Telugu for *Bhagavat Gita*. 
to the Board of Revenue dated 3 March 1897. The appeal refers to a letter dated 14 May 1795 by the Revenue Collector of the Krishna District, D. W. Ragan, which renewed the original land grant. Prof. Jonnalagadda posits that this letter (from Ragan) and the renewal of the grant would only have been sent once the residents of Kuchipudi had produced the original copper plates (Jonnalagadda 1996:41). Though the official origin myth of Kuchipudi village refers all the way back to these seventeenth-century copper plates from the Nawab of Golconda, the plates—and therefore proof of the land grant—have been reported as missing for generations. In other words, there has never been any verifiable evidence that the Nawab of Golconda was responsible for this land grant or that this settlement of Brahmins who practised a dance-drama tradition existed at that point in time. Yet all of the documents that I have listed above lead back to it. This lack of proof was maddening to me at the time, and I found myself constantly wondering, “How is it possible that an entire material history—and a constantly referenced one at that—meant to corroborate the legitimacy of the village and its residents, does not contain even one solid piece of evidence?”

Poet-turned-film-director-turned-art-critic Bhagavathula Sankara Sastry (1925–1998), better known by his pen name, Arudra, brought this very question to light in the 1980s and 1990s in a series of articles. Though best known for his work as a writer and lyricist, toward the end of his life Arudra became a vociferous critic of kuchipudi historiography. In an article written only a few years before his passing, Arudra takes particular exception to the legend that the Nawab of Golconda presented the village as a gift in 1675, not only in light of the missing physical evidence, but also because of the lack of references to this supposed event in the documents discussed above. He asks:

If…the Nawab of Golconda, gifted the village as an agraharam in 1675, would the memorable event have been forgotten by the descendants of the recipients when they wrote the agreement of mutual trust [land partition deed] in 1763? Would the people of Kuchipudi not have proudly recorded that their immediate forefathers received a conferential sanud from the Nawab of Golconda? (Arudra 1994:30)

Despite the fallacies in kuchipudi historiography that Arudra points out and the wild goose chase that I undertook during my time in the field, the issue of the land grant, steeped as it is in reverential tones and mythological religiosity, is intrinsic to kuchipudi’s claims to historicity and thus to its cultural value. These documents have never and will never require authentication to be authenticating. It is the mystery of these missing documents that has preoccupied scholars of kuchipudi for generations and that makes Kuchipudi’s history so alluring. Indeed, this history of Kuchipudi village is readily accepted for the same reasons Incredible India recently reported that a surprising majority of its annual revenue comes from middle-class Indian consumers, not foreigners: these images and histories fit snugly within the broader narrative of India’s mythical past made manifestly modern (Bryant 2011).

14. The copy I obtained from Prof. Jonnalagadda is a handwritten facsimile, dated 1904, and can be found as an appendix to her dissertation (Jonnalagadda 1996:185).
This point was underscored when I arrived in Kuchipudi village and was greeted by the following inscription on the gates to the dance school: “Golconda Nawab Abul Hasan Tanishah (AD 1682–1697) presented to the Kuchipudi bhāgavatulu.”

This gate leads to the building that houses the state-run dance school in Kuchipudi village, Siddhendra Kalakshetra, which was originally instituted in 1957 under the state-level cultural ministry, the Andhra Pradesh Sangeeta Nataka Akademi (APSNA). In the early 1980s, the APSNA was dissolved and in its place a university, dubbed Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University (PSTU), was formed with the following mission statement:

This University was founded with the broad objectives of serving the cause of the Telugu people, both within the State and outside...the University was established to function as a central organization for teaching and research in Language and Literature, History and Culture, Fine Arts and Performing Arts, religion and philosophy of the Telugu speaking people. It strives to inculcate a sense of identity in them as citizens of India and as responsible representatives of Andhra Pradesh. (Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University 2015)

I interpret the inscription on the gates to the school as part of a broader practice of “inculcating” Telugu culture that is revealed in the PSTU mission statement. Constructed histories of Telugu culture, like those I witnessed in Kuchipudi village, are statements of Telugu power—statements that are further reified under government sponsorship. In Kuchipudi’s case, governmental organizations like the APSNA and now PSTU underwrite and validate such narratives about Telugu culture and the geographical region now known as Andhra Pradesh.

For the past several years, this process has become further ensconced in the public consciousness through an annual heritage tourism festival sponsored by the Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (APTDC), aptly named “Siddhendra Yogi Mahotsav: Kuchipudi Natyakshetram” (Great Festival of Siddhendra Yogi: Abode of Kuchipudi Dance). Though the involvement of the APTDC in the festival is relatively recent, during my time in Kuchipudi it became clear to me that the historiographical trends that buttress the popular version of kuchipudi history are only further supported by recent attempts to make the village a tourist destination. To this end, in the past few years, the organizers of the festival have erected landmarks to materialize the mythopoetic narratives about the village and the dance. The primary figure in charge of these efforts in Kuchipudi village, Pasumarthi Keshav Prasad, a quiet but intense man, was proud to show me around and point out these new additions to the landscape of the village. During our tour of the village and its newly erected landmarks, Prasad drew my attention to the opening page of the brochure circulated at the Mahotsav, where the most recent additions were listed in a section soliciting funding for the festival.17

15. “Tanishah” and “Tanashah” are two variants of spelling and transliteration. The dates listed on the gates are inaccurate: Tanashah ruled from 1672 to 1687.
17. According to Prasad, these landmarks were built through private business sponsorship.
The 2010 addition had already been completed while I was visiting, and Prasad wanted me to see it before I left. Housed in an otherwise deserted, concrete, three-story building, the 2010 instalment (see figure 2) is a 183-centimetre-tall facsimile of the 1763 partition deed. The metal facsimile is erroneously titled “Dharmahasana Pattika” (Endowment List) in reference to the renewed land grant mentioned in the 1897 appeal. The decision to inscribe the deed on copper-like sheet metal is a clear reference to, if not blatant misrepresentation of, the missing copper plates supposedly inscribed by the Nawab in 1675. In other words, this tourist landmark effectively elides three different documents, all in the name of celebrating Kuchipudi’s status as a Brahmin settlement that traces its existence to the late 1600s.

While I was perplexed by the ways in which history and the narration of history could become one and the same, the motivations for such an elision remained my fundamental question. After all, by the time I arrived in Kuchipudi village, many months into my fieldwork, I already understood quite clearly that the standard historical narratives were engineered to support claims to cultural power and legitimacy. My goal during my time in the village, therefore, shifted to sorting out how and why Kuchipudi village and its dance became history, in deed as well as discourse. Whether or not Kuchipudi village truly existed as a sacred Brahmin enclave for dance in 1675, this aspect of the narrative was clearly an essential element in kuchipudi practitioners’ claims to posterity.

As I stood in front of that life-size representation of Kuchipudi village history that listed the names of Brahmin men, I was confronted with the enduring contradiction between kuchipudi dance and historiography. I was reminded of Kanchanamala and of the items she performed in 1958—repertoire that dance scholars now

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Thanks to the continuing support of these donors, festival organizers have been able to install one landmark per year since 2006.
believe belonged to female performance traditions in Andhra rather than those from the village. It was courtesan repertoire that Kanchanamala performed, and that, thirty years later, I studied as kuchipudi in the United States. Considering these origins, why does kuchipudi continue to represent itself as a high-caste male form? What might it mean to the village or to those who identify as kuchipudi dancers to acknowledge this gender history?

Gender and the archive

The rigid division of male and female traditions has defined much of the way South Asian dance history has been written over the past century, and kuchipudi history is no exception. For example, by emphasizing its identity as a dance-drama tradition in his speech at the All-India Dance Seminar in 1958, historians like Appa Rao sought to differentiate kuchipudi from solo female traditions. The differentiation between group male dramatic genres, known as nāṭya melam (drama troupe), and solo female genres, known as naṭṭuva melam (dance troupe), speaks to the lasting influence of colonial text-based ontologies, as well as the epistemological limitations of the archive in tracing the history of gender in Indian dance. In her work, Anjali Arondekar has argued convincingly for a more measured approach to archival work on gender in postcolonial settings, one that accounts for the “relationships between the seductions of recovery and the occlusions such retrieval mandates” (Arondekar 2009:2). Arondekar’s critique is apropos considering the gendered history of dance relies heavily, if not exclusively, on medieval texts such as Jaya Senapati’s thirteenth-century treatise, Nrtta Ratnavali, an oft-referenced treatise that reifies the dichotomy between male and female performance styles and their respective techniques. Texts such as Senapati’s corroborate colonial and heteronormative narratives on dance and sexuality in the early twentieth century, underwriting the social and cultural reforms that ultimately delegitimized the courtesan/devadāsī and her way of living. The controversy over these reforms and the revival movements that followed—stemming from ontologies that privilege the archive for its recuperative potential—have constrained the study of dance in South India and, in doing so, limited our understanding of how repertoire moves across caste and gender lines.

In his work, Davesh Soneji proposes a useful tripartite model that illustrates the fluidity of performance genres in Andhra prior to the stigmatization of female dance in the early twentieth century (2004:75; see figure 3). For my purposes, figure 3 highlights the overlap between gendered performance practices as well

18. There are two notable movements called Vilasini Natyam and Andhra Natyam that both seek to reclaim and resituate the hereditary female dance of Andhra. See Jyoti (2010) and Ramakrishna (1987).
19. Though the movement to ban devadāsī dance and the dedication of girls to temples began as early as the 1880s, legislative measures in South India were only passed in 1947 after Indian independence. See Srinivasan (1984, 1985) for further information on the history of devadāsī reforms and legislation. See Peterson and Soneji (2008) and Soneji (2012) for discussions of devadāsī historiography in the context of dance studies.
as genres such as *yakṣagāna*, kalāpam, and veṣam—practices and genres that are treated as mutually exclusive in mythopoetic narratives about *kuchipudi*.

The earliest documented performance traditions practised by the men of Kuchipudi village fall under the categories of kalāpam and veṣam. Originally a literary tradition, the kalāpam did not emerge as an established performance genre until the late nineteenth century. Around this time kalāpam texts became visible through performances by a variety of groups, both female and male. These texts fall into two categories: those that are based on narratives about a character known as Satyabhama are called Bhāmākalāpam, and those that are based on a conversation between a Brahmin and a gollabhama (milkmaid) are called Gollakalapam. The portrayal of Satyabhama, in particular, is emphasized in both written and oral histories on the village since the mythical founding father of the *kuchipudi* tradition, Siddhendra Yogi, is said to have written Bhāmākalāpam.

It would not be an overstatement to say that, both as an image and as a character, Satyabhama is *kuchipudi* (see figure 4). In the popular origin myths circulated by the APTDC, Siddhendra Yogi’s divine creation of Bhāmākalāpam is described as the devotional practice that gave birth to the dance tradition called *kuchipudi*. However, the narratives about Satyabhama found in Bhāmākalāpam appeared in Telugu literature and poetry long before the kalāpam form or the *kuchipudi* dance tradition. Satyabhama, though an otherwise common character in earlier textual

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20. *Yakṣagānas* are full-length dramas that tell a story from beginning to end (usually linear narratives) and involve a cast of many actors playing different characters.

21. *Kalāpams* involve one or, at most, two characters with little narrative content and are sometimes episodic, primarily exploring a particular state of being.

22. *Veṣams* involve one character performing a monologue or a scene from a well-known drama.

23. Though Satyabhama first appears as a significant character in the Telugu *purāṇa* (literary epics) era in Bammera Potana’s *Mahabhagavatamu*, it was not until the latter half of the sixteenth century at the Tanjavur Nayaka court that Satyabhama came into focus as part of a specifically dance- and drama-oriented culture, known today for the development of important South Indian genres, such as *yakṣagāna* (see Soneji 2004).
traditions, was not a popular character in performance genres until the late nineteenth century. It was around this time that various versions of Bhāmākalāpam, by authors such as Gaddam Subbarayudu (d. 1940), became popular through performance by a variety of groups like the Brahmins of Kuchipudi as well as the devadāsī and the goldsmith communities in central and coastal Andhra (Soneji 2004:62).

In other words, the kuchipudi tradition of Bhāmākalāpam as we know it today originates from compositions written in the late nineteenth century and no earlier. More importantly, despite the current Brahmin-centric mythopoetics about the village, the performance of Bhāmākalāpam appears to have been a shared tradition across caste and gender lines. So, what exactly happened in the specific locale of Kuchipudi and to the dance tradition practised there during the twentieth century that made it possible to historicize these Brahmin men and their families as the exclusive performers of Bhāmākalāpam?

Mythopoetics and the men of Kuchipudi

Through the joint efforts of a variety of organizations, like the Kuchipudi Arts Academy in Chennai (APTDC) and the dance journal, Nartanam (published by the Mumbai-based Kuchipudi Kala Kendra), over the past decade there has been a proliferation of kuchipudi historiography that seeks to establish the dance form as the primary Telugu dance tradition in India. Narratives attributing kuchipudi’s fame to Siddendhra Yogi and his composition, Bhāmākalāpam, have merged with oral and positivist Telugu-language historiography, particularly by way of biographies that are overwhelmingly written by and about Brahmin men. For example, articles on kuchipudi history, published in Nartanam and echoed in tourism campaigns and cultural events in the diaspora, describe kuchipudi in three phases, represented by three men. During the first phase, kuchipudi dancers were known for the kalāpam genre. This phase is personified and represented by Vempati Venkatanarayana (ca. 1871–1935). The third phase is represented by Chinta Venkataramayya (ca. 1860–1949), a man who is credited by kuchipudi historians for revitalizing the dance-drama (yakṣagāna) traditions of the village and placing Kuchipudi on the map (so to speak). It is the second phase, represented by Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry (ca. 1886–1956; see figure 5), the guru who both studied under and taught female dancers, that occupies my attention for the rest of this article.

Though he was born in Kuchipudi, relatively little is known about Sastry’s life. More recent biographical sketches report that though he trained in the traditions of Bhāmākalāpam, he was always on the move, touring with his troupe or teaching, and was rarely to be found in the village (Sarma 2002). As a dancer, 24

24. In tracing the development of Satyabhama’s character portrayal across centuries of literature, it is possible to connect the current kuchipudi traditions of Bhāmākalāpam to a popular myth about a pārijāta (jasmine) flower. The basic storyline of the pārijāta myth involves three main characters: Krishna and his two wives, Rukmini and Satyabhama. The conflict that drives the narrative begins when Krishna gifts the celestial pārijāta to Rukmini rather than Satyabhama. Satyabhama, an arrogant and vain woman, is enraged that Krishna would show such favouritism to Rukmini.
Sastry is remembered for his curiosity and his admiration for different genres of dance. He is rumoured to have travelled to Tanjavur in 1921 specifically to study bharatanatyam. After failing to secure a guru, Sastry returned to his village, where he began interacting with hereditary female performers who lived in the area. In their remembrances of Sastry, many of his students note the exhilaration of training under him as he fashioned a solo dance repertoire. One dancer, Joysula Seetarama Sastry, remembers the hopefulness that Sastry brought to an otherwise underemployed village with his revolutionary ideas on kuchipudi dance:

Almost everyone in Kuchipudi had the same kind of training as I had. Learn the old traditional Kuchipudi kalāpam and yakṣagāna either from one’s parent or guru, learn music from another guru and ultimately land up with Sastry. That was because of two reasons. One was that it was new and was thrilling. There was an individual satisfaction that you were a dancer. In yakṣagāna you were one among many and for a long time you had to be satisfied only with minor roles. There was a second more important reason though: this new dance that Sastry taught might earn us our livelihood. More and more individuals wanted to learn that so they could make a living. These reasons prompted all of us to go to Sastry. (2002:42)

At a time when kuchipudi repertoire revolved around theatrical ensemble genres, Sastry fashioned a solo repertoire, most likely based on interactions with
female dancers and in the spirit of oriental dance popularized by contemporaries such as Uday Shankar (1900–1977). Sastry’s documented repertoire included pieces in languages besides Telugu, such as Marathi, indicating that the style was not defined by its linguistic identity when Sastry was performing and touring. More important, based on even the narrowest interpretations of his life and his contribution to kuchipudi, one would conclude that he was the first from the village to teach female students. Sastry’s interactions with dance cultures that are now understood as distinct from those practised in Kuchipudi village raises a number of issues, particularly how we think of intersections of caste and gender in South Indian dance history. To be sure, kuchipudi’s claims to male Brahmin notoriety are nowhere to be found in Sastry’s biography. The stigma attached to female dance in South India and accolades bestowed upon high-caste men were clearly not Sastry’s primary concerns—an observation that raises questions about how far anti-nautch reform ideology had spread in South India in the early twentieth century and how these ideas participated in discourses on oriental or cosmopolitan dance, if at all.

Oriental dance and cosmopolitan kuchipudi

From about 1916 to 1947, Sastry travelled across India with his troupe, performing in cities as far-flung from Kuchipudi as Pune and Bhopal. It was during these extended tours that Sastry interacted with and observed a variety of performers such as Uday Shankar, the world-renowned prince of oriental dance in India. As others have already discussed, Shankar, along with dancers like Ram Gopal and Ruth St. Denis, played a pivotal role in introducing and popularizing Indian dance in the West. By incorporating dance techniques and genres from all over the subcontinent, Shankar’s style represented a pan-Indian identity and a consciously modern cosmopolitan aesthetic.

Central to this understanding of Sastry’s contribution is a recognition that he was working alongside, if not in the wake of, orientalist trends Uday Shankar had popularized in North India. As Erdman (1987) explains in her work on Shankar’s performance practice, his orientalist technique functioned primarily on a principle of translation. She notes that Shankar trained “his non-Indian dancers to move like Indians” (68). This method emphasized communication through mudras (hand gestures) as well as abhinayam (facial expressions) to express moods (see figure 6).

25. In the first half of the twentieth century, “oriental” dance or music referred primarily to expressive forms that were understood to originate in areas that fell under colonial rule, but also included areas glossed more generally as “the East.” In the early twentieth century, dancers like Uday Shankar, who travelled from India to perform in New York and London, were often marketed as “oriental dancers,” a strategy that allowed both dancers and promoters to capitalize on the racialized sexuality and exoticism of brown bodies. See Hanna (2010) for further discussion of dance, sexuality, race, and orientalism.

26. Genres such as pada varnam, varnam, swara jathi, aṣṭapadi, jāvali, and padam.

In other words, Shankar offered a performative interpretation of Indianness both to the West and to India. His programmes were carefully planned and intricately staged affairs with elaborate costuming, but did not involve full-length performances of dance-dramas. Relying instead on the expressive Indianness imparted to his dancers, Shankar popularized “short thematic dances…rather than long narratives because like paintings, their titles gave most of the theme away, and the beauty of the dancers and their movements carried the rest” (ibid.:75).

Though they did not meet until late in his life, Sastry’s interactions with Uday Shankar are emphasized in most biographical accounts (e.g., Sarma 2002; Jonnalagadda 1996). These kuchipudi historians often highlight Shankar’s appreciation for Sastry’s rendition of Bhāmākalāpam at a performance in Hyderabad as an endorsement of Sastry’s appeal to cosmopolitan audiences (Sarma 2002). Whether or not the pair interacted on a personal level, Sastry’s performance records, especially from his time in Hyderabad, reveal striking similarities to the programming that Shankar and his company were popularizing. Telugu newspaper accounts and interviews during Sastry’s tours suggest a dual agenda: to cast kuchipudi as a vernacular but cosmopolitan dance form while aligning Sastry with orientalist symbols of modernity like Uday Shankar. For example, an article published in the Hyderabad Bulletin on 14 October 1941 elaborates this agenda. Titled “Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry and His Troupe’s Dances,” the article reads:
The Oriental Dance Recital given by Thandava Krishna and Party (Kuchipudi Dancers) under the auspices of the Hyderabad Fine Arts Society at Boy Scouts Headquarters Secunderabad on 12–10–1941 was a great success. The highly cosmopolitan gathering that assembled at the Boy Scouts Headquarters, Secunderabad is itself an eloquent proof of the universal popularity of the dancers and their excellence of their performance as well as the promise they hold for the future. Although the songs that formed the background of these dancers were in Telugu yet many of those present on the occasion who did not understand the language could easily grasp the spirit of the dances. The school of dance, which these dancers represent, the Kuchipudi School, is a very ancient one. The party will proceed after finishing their engagements here to Bombay, Indore, Agra and Delhi en route [to] Almora where they will spend some time at the Art Centre founded by Uday Shankar. (As quoted in Sarma 2002:83)

A comparison of each dance master’s concert programmes further suggests that Sastry sought to emulate Shankar’s programmatic strategies. Much like Shankar, Sastry also organized his performances around orientalist representations of Hindu mythology. For example, both Sastry’s and Shankar’s performances featured segments titled “Love Dances of Radha and Krishna” that narrated the mythologized romantic escapades of the Hindu icon, Krishna, with a young cowherdess, Radha. Overlaps in thematic material such as this suggest a perceptive awareness on Sastry’s part of items that cosmopolitan audiences appreciated—items popularized by Shankar, which highlighted gendered as well as sexualized aesthetics of what would, in short order, become globally understood as Hindu dance. In many ways, Sastry stands apart from the current histories of Kuchipudi village because he rarely spent any time there and because his performance practices clearly aimed to transcend his identity as a dancer from a specific locale. Indeed, Sastry’s orientalist aesthetic complicates the ways in which we can historicize the intersections of history, performance, and gender in South India, not least on account of his interactions with artists like Shankar as well as hereditary female dancers, but also the middle-class women he went on to teach.

Karnatic music and kuchipudi dance

An oft-cited comment on Sastry’s life is that he was so well-regarded in his specialty, the art of abhinayam (facial expression), that the internationally acclaimed hereditary female bharatanatyam dancer, Balasaraswati, studied with him for a time. The pair were photographed in 1948 when Sastry was in Madras (now Chennai) to receive an honour on behalf of the Madras government from the soon-to-be chairman of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi and Chief Justice of Madras, P. V. Rajamannar (see figure 7). The meeting and subsequent relationship that this picture memorializes is repeatedly cited in kuchipudi historiography as evidence of the high regard in which those in the Madras establishment, such as Balasaraswati, held Sastry (e.g., Jonnalagadda 1996; Sarma 2002; Kothari 2001). Following this meeting, Balasaraswati began to study abhinayam under Sastry.

28. See, for example, respective programmes in Erdman (1987) and Sarma (2002).
Two particular mentions of Sastry’s expertise in abhinayam in her memoirs appear regularly in kuchipudi histories:

Lakshminarayana Sastry opened great new vistas for me, especially in varnam improvisation. He shared his immense knowledge, and in a very real sense, gave me the confidence to attempt those things I do today. (As quoted in Knight 2010:139)

Sastry was expert in the interpretation of padams. He spoke his own idiom. He would ask: “Can you do this varnam? How would you cast its horoscope?” Sastri commanded me to cast the horoscope of a Todi varnam one day. I did it without any repetitions. He responded by asking me to give it up and stick to padams! “They are your family heritage,” he said, “and with someone like your mother singing padams, you can have the whole world in your hands.” (As quoted in Raman and Ramachandran 1984:36)

This final statement suggests a great deal as to what Sastry believed were the trends in the dance world in the 1940s. He saw the potential for great success within the hereditary female tradition of expressive solo dance set to lyrical music. These traditions, which relied on compositional and performance genres like the padam, differed from the kuchipudi tradition in their basic format (solo female versus group male) but also in their aesthetic philosophy, which placed a far greater emphasis on the exploration of an emotion state (rasa) than on plot development. Furthermore, judging by his comments on Balasaraswati’s musical accompaniment, Sastry recognized the importance of music, particularly the voice, in the success of a dancer’s career. Kuchipudi, as a theatrical tradition, also relied upon the voice, but more in terms of speech than song. Balasaraswati’s style, which Sastry began to emulate, communicated through a combination of body language and expression of emotions, all set to melody in song.

By incorporating musically driven genres and techniques into his performance practice, Sastry made a calculated move away from his own heritage and toward what he saw as a more marketable dance style. Rather than long pieces like Bhāmākalāpam that explored a character’s evolving mental state through dialogue and limited repetition or embellishment, Sastry and his students performed

Figure 7. Balasarawati and Lakshminarayana Sastry in Madras, 1948 (photo courtesy of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Archives).

shorter verse–refrain songs that explored a single emotional state through facial expressions and hand gestures. Indeed, the musical style and song forms that Sastry incorporated into the *kuchipudi* performance practice utilized the communicative potential of another fast-evolving expressive medium: Karnatic classical music.

Research by anthropologists and ethnomusicologists, such as Amanda Weidman (2006) and Lakshmi Subramanian (2006), focuses on song genres, paying particular attention to the codification, standardization, and institutionalization of Karnatic classical music in Madras. Judging by Sastry’s repertoire, which grew to include genres such as *varnams* and *kīrtanams*, it is clear that he observed the parameters that defined classical Karnatic music practice when reformulating *kuchipudi* as a culturally relevant dance style. But the process of legitimation involved including some genres while excluding others. Subramanian notes that in constructing a classical repertoire, the Madras Music Academy relegated certain song forms such as *padams*, *jāvalīs*, and other dance-related genres to a lesser status in the classical Karnatic tradition because of their expressive and sensual content (Subramanian 2006:149; see also Soneji 2010). The relative value of song genres such as a *jāvalī* (considered “light” classical) in comparison with a *varnam* (considered classical “art” music) has faded as we enter the twenty-first century, but the differentiation in the vocal styles suitable to each remains.

While I was in the field, particularly in Chennai, I often encountered comments about the musical accompaniment in *kuchipudi* that prescribed certain vocal styles to dance. One conversation between the primary guru at the Kuchipudi Arts Academy (KAA) in Chennai, Vempati Ravi, and a senior student, Prabha Ramesh, differentiated between the amount of classical stylization appropriate for a music concert and for a dance performance (Vempati Ravi and Prabha Ramesh, pers. comm., 28 March 2009). The distinction, in this case, was inherent in the emphasis placed on virtuosic ornamentation or, alternatively, on the text. Ramesh demonstrated to me how one should sing for dance, with a smooth vocal line and limited ornaments, in contrast with classical Karnatic concert style, which she caricatured by pulling at the skin by her voice box and shaking it. Excessive ornamentation undermined the communication of the emotion, she explained, so too much ornamentation might be fine in a music concert, but was inappropriate for dance.

In an interview, Pemmaraju Surya Rao, the lead vocalist for the KAA in the 1960s, described the direction he received from dance gurus when accompanying a performance in exactly the same terms. In his time, he told me, he was criticized for sounding too much like a concert singer and obscuring the emotion, but he was hired because he had musical credentials as a classically trained Karnatic singer (Pemmaraju Surya Rao, pers. comm., 14 April 2009). Sastry’s comments on Balasaraswati’s accompanists and the examples of the aesthetic negotiation in institutionalized musical accompaniment reveal the extent to which Karnatic music and Karnatic musicians underwrote *kuchipudi*’s claims to cultural and artistic value, particularly in Madras, which, by all accounts, was the epicentre of the performing arts world in postcolonial South India. As another informant and Chennai-based
dance critic, V. A. K. Ranga Rao, once explained to me, the musical accompaniment in early to mid-century kuchipudi was, simply put, artistically bankrupt:

Back then, they didn’t follow rāgam [mode] and tālam [metre]. All the music in Kuchipudi tended towards Mohana [rāgam] and relied upon stock tunes. To be taken seriously in Madras, Kuchipudi had to evolve and refine its music as well as its dance. (V. A. K. Ranga Rao, pers. comm., 6 Jan 2009)

Kuchipudi, as it existed in the early twentieth century, relied primarily on speech with a little singing, but certainly not the kind of professionalized concert hall singing that was becoming the standard in both music and dance performances in Madras. At a time when music was becoming increasingly important to the cultural ethos of postcolonial Madras, it appears that Sastry recognized that dance was quickly evolving into a composite art form.

Considering how much time Sastry spent in Madras, it is unsurprising that, as early as 1938, a teaching manual for a young man in Kuchipudi village by the name Vempati Satyanarayana (better known as Vempati Pedda Satyam) reveals a predilection towards song genres culled from mejuvāṇī (salon, entertainment dance) practices. With the exception of Bhāmākalāpam, all of these pieces belonged to female dance traditions, and most characterized a solo female character. The variety of songs, rāgams, and tālams featured in the manual speak to the influence of Karnatic music practice, particularly in light of Ranga Rao’s comments (above) on the overuse of Mohana rāgam in mid-century kuchipudi dance. Furthermore, the inclusion of genres and rāgams like Gopika gītam in behāg suggests the influence of Hindustani (North Indian) classical music (see figure 8).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SONG GENRE or SONG TITLE</th>
<th>RĀGAM / TĀLAM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gopika gītam</td>
<td>behāg/ādi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adhyatma Ramayana kīrtanam</td>
<td>yadukula kāmbhōgi/ādi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krishna lila</td>
<td>jhanjāti – bhairavī/ādi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aṣṭapadi (“Deerasameeray”)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>varṇam (“Samini Ramanave”)</td>
<td>khamas/ādi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>jāvali (“Tattara Padanela”)</td>
<td>kalyāṇi/ādi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>swara jathī</td>
<td>bilahari/ādi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genre not noted (“Vinave Yashoda”)</td>
<td>kāmbhōgi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genre not noted (“Madhava Darshanameera”)</td>
<td>Sree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shabdām (“Ramayana Shabdām”)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annamayya kīrtanam</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhāmākalāpam (excerpts)</td>
<td>n/a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 8. Repertoire list based on Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry’s teaching manual for Vempati Satyanarayana; Kuchipudi village, 24 September 1938.

30. For research on music and cultural identity in Madras and Chennai, see Hancock (2008), Rudisill (2007), Subramanian (2006), and Weidman (2006).
Gender and national archives

Sastry’s sustained interaction with and appreciation of performance practices that were historically associated with women first struck me well before I came across his teaching manual for Vempati Satyanarayana. Early in my fieldwork, while I was in New Delhi at the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi Archives (SNA), I happened upon a few photographs of Sastry among a larger collection from around the time the Akademi was formed in 1953. I recognized these photos immediately: practically every published history of kuchipudi featured them (see figures 5 and 7). The rest of the photos in the album, however, without exception, were of women. Some of the faces, like Balasaraswati’s, were familiar to me. According to the photo archivist, Pritpal Singh, soon after Independence in 1946, it was decided that a team of photographers should be sent to various locales across the new nation to take pictures of important elderly artists and teachers for posterity. SNA’s archivist explained to me that this philosophy remains central to current archiving practices at the SNA. Essentially, the SNA receives a tip that an elderly guru in a major and/or classical style is nearing the end of his/her life and must be photographed (now videotaped) to preserve the art. Alternatively, if an artist becomes popular for incorporating something new or innovating within an existing tradition, he/she also warrants documentation by the SNA.

In Sastry’s case, it would appear that he was included among a group of aging artists in Madras. Judging by the available chronological information about his life, he was photographed when he was in Madras to receive the “Kuchipudi Natya Kalanidhi” award from the Madras government. It is apparent from these photo records that as of the early 1950s, Sastry was well known in Madras and was therefore included in the SNA photo project that chronicled the dance heritage of Madras. Interestingly, though the entire album, with the exception of Sastry, featured female dancers, I found not a single picture of the otherwise ubiquitous Rukmini Devi Arundale or those in Madras whose names have since become synonymous with the reinvention of female dance practices. In other words, Sastry was recorded for his participation in a performance culture that featured female dancers—women who are today understood as courtesans.

In 2002, the dance journal, Nartanam, published a special tribute issue on Sastry featuring a number of interviews with his former students. Without exception, each of these accounts describes Sastry as a trailblazer who fashioned a solo repertoire for kuchipudi that highlighted female involvement, a crucial turning point for an otherwise male-dominated tradition. Many of the accounts explicitly mention his fascination and close interactions with hereditary female performers and their solo dance traditions. One of Sastry’s early male students from Kuchipudi reminisces:

31. A visit to the SNA website confirms the terminology I received from the archivist. The term “classical” does not appear on the page listing the SNA’s annual awardees in music, dance, and theatre (Sangeet Natak Akademi 2015).
In Thanjavur, he insisted on our seeing Bharatanatyam performances. He would immediately come back and say “solo” dance was the best for Kuchipudi also… he was a keen observer. Wherever we went he never missed an opportunity to witness other dancers performing. There was Annabathula Chitti [a hereditary female performer] who learnt from Sastry…for two years. Her mother wanted to do abhinayam for Sastry…and he obliged. If there was something new in any dance programme, he would immediately capture and use it in his own work. He never missed a mejuvāṇi in the vicinity of Machilipatnam. Even the devadāsī dancers wanted him as the guest of the evening because, if he appreciated their programme, that would be an endorsement! (As quoted in Sastry 2002:44–45)

Statements from students, such as this one, reveal an important aspect of Sastry’s creative process: Sastry was industrious and incorporated dance elements that he saw and liked into his own repertoire. More importantly, this description reveals the personal relationships Sastry maintained with other artists, including hereditary female performers. Recent studies on the female traditions of Andhra have identified two contemporaries of Sastry’s who trained with him at some point in their dance careers: Duggirala Jagadamba (c. 1911–1979) and Pandiri Venkataratnam (ca. 1905–1971). In his discussion of these women and their affiliation with the men of Kuchipudi village, Soneji suggests that it was through interactions with these women, and potentially others like them, that Sastry was able to expand “his own repertoire of padams, javalis and pada varnams” (Soneji 2004:87).

Vempati Chinna Satyam (1929–2012), founder of the KAA and a student of Sastry’s, summarizes his guru’s creative process in a way that supports this view of Sastry’s influence:

Everything was new and his own…All the items he did were more or less his own. He borrowed heavily from all over. From Marathi, Tamil, Sanskrit, traditional Telugu songs—everything that he can lay his hands on. He was also a great experimentalist. In fact in the transition days, he was doing “Madhuranagarilo” and other light songs. But if he were to go only in that line he would not have been remembered now. What he did was entirely in the classical mould. He was responsible for giving “solo” its rightful place in our dance scenario. (Satyam 2002:29–30)

How could everything be “new and his own” and “borrowed”? And more importantly, from where and from whom exactly was Sastry borrowing? Where did Sastry learn pieces like “Madhuranagarilo” and other light songs,” or the padams and varnams Chinna Satyam describes learning from him? Despite hesitation on the part of kuchipudi dancers and historians to discuss Sastry and the history of kuchipudi in such terms, it is clear that the original source of kuchipudi’s solo repertoire was not the men of Kuchipudi village, but the women of the area, also referred to today as kalāvantulu.

The modifications Sastry introduced to kuchipudi, as exhibited in his teaching manuals and performance records, reveal a perceptive awareness of broader trends in Indian dance and musical worlds. Sastry was simultaneously trying on many new identities for kuchipudi dance. His experimentation with so-called oriental themes appears to have occurred concurrently with his incorporation of courtesan
song genres into kuchipudi repertoire. I am inclined to see Sastry as a pivotal figure in the trajectory that dance in South India went on to follow—a striking example of a liminal space between dance as history and dance as modernity. To be sure, despite the celebration in current kuchipudi histories of the changes that Sastry introduced, acknowledging that Brahmin men maintained close and/or professional relationships with women who are now understood as courtesans remains unpalatable for most official histories.

**Mythopoetics and the archive**

From corroborating archival documents that remain unseen to non-normative caste and gender biographies that remain unheard, the history of Kuchipudi village and Sastry’s biography represent the very nature of mythopoetics in South India. It is in moments such as these—in which positivism seems inevitable if not impossible—that historiography betrays the very epistemological truths it seeks to upload. Kuchipudi’s mythopoetics, evinced in the landmarks that now almost outnumber the village’s residents, buttress larger intersectional and institutionalized narratives that span the breadth and depth of Indian society at this moment, revealing the inequities of caste, class, and gender, and the palimpsest of ethnography through which we view history.

In this sense, the archive is and always will be mythopoetic; that is to say, it is called into existence for the sake of historicity, and, in so doing, it sutures together past and present, history and performance. Indeed, Sastry’s adoption and adaptation of historically female genres and their subsequent transmission as kuchipudi amounts to a truism: the recuperative utility of the archive exists only in the very act of its performance. And such performances, whether they be through tourism initiatives or on the transnational stages of Chennai and San Francisco, underscore Taylor’s pithy claim that “to say something is a performance amounts to a ontological affirmation, though a thoroughly localized one” (Taylor 2003:3).

As a kuchipudi dancer and as a Telugu Brahmin woman, I am haunted by a desire to ethically authenticate the tradition that I carry in my very body and to find an unpatronizing way to point out appropriation and injustice. As a product of the American academy, I am reminded that revisionist and critical histories such as the ones I have considered in these pages are always available to those who seek to name the power in a story and that introducing complicating characters into a history does not render that history less teleological. Indeed, naming a power, in this case kuchipudi, changes little on a day-to-day level for those who live and perform within its structures. To be sure, the mythopoetics of kuchipudi’s circumscribed embodied existence remind us of the ever-present distance between the real and the constructed, the ontological and the epistemological—a space in which the dance’s meaning, for those who identify with it, can and does remain intact.
GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*abhinayam*: facial expressions

*aṣṭapadi*: song genre organized into eight lines of poetry, associated with female dance traditions

*bhāgavatulu*: men, usually high-caste, who act in *bhāgavatam*

*bhāgavatam*: theatrical, staged production; usually based on themes from the epics

*devadāsī*: literally, a servant of god; references a social group of female courtesans in South India who dance and sing primarily in temples

*guru*: teacher

*jāvali*: song genre that generally explores emotions of love and longing; associated with female dance traditions

*kalāpam*: South Indian performance genre that features one or, at most, two characters; little narrative content, non-linear, sometimes episodic, explores a particular state of being or mood

*kalāvantulu*: literally, artists; references a social group of female courtesans in South India who dance and sing at festivals and special occasions

*karana*: dance pose; the *Nāṭya Shāstra* lists 108 poses

*kīrtanam*: bipartite song form in South Indian classical (Karnatic) music. The formal sections, in order, are *pallavi* and *charanam*.

*mejuvāṇi*: literally “performed for a host”; a courtesan salon performance

*mudra*: hand gesture

*nāṭya meḷam*: meḷam literally translates to “troupe” or “band”; refers specifically to female courtesan troupes

*nāṭya meḷam*: troupe of male performers, generally *bhāgavatulu* who perform theatrical genres

*nautch*: dance

*padam*: song genre that generally explores emotions of love and longing; associated with female dance traditions

*pada varṇam*: much like a *varṇam* in structure and content, but with added emphasis on rhythmic elements

*pārijāta*: jasmine flower

*purāṇa*: a written work; a Hindu epic

*rāgam*: mode or set of pitches in Indian classical music systems

*rasa*: literally “juice”; mood in dance and music

*sanud*: title deed or documents that record a gift or endowment of property

*strī veṣam*: female impersonation or, literally, “female disguise”

*swara jathi*: song genre that places a greater emphasis on rhythm and, in dance, on virtuosic footwork

*tālam*: literally, “beat”; also used to refer to many aspects of musical time such as rhythm and meter

*varṇam*: considered the most complex genre in Karnatic music; consists of short metric sections that express the main features and requirements of a *rāgam*

*veṣam*: literally, “disguise”

*yakṣagāna*: full-length dramas that tell a story from beginning to end (usually linear narratives); many actors playing different parts
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అన్నిని గ్రామం ప్రభావం కోసం నిర్ణయం

సమాచార రంగానికి చెందిన గ్రామం, ఆమెకు కానేవినందం కొనసాగించి వస్తుంది, మేం నిర్మాణం ప్రతి ప్రామాణిక నిర్ణయానికి వస్తుంది. తెలుగు సంస్క్రతి మీద కుచిపూడి గ్రామం, ఆమెకు ప్రమాణం చారిత్రిక నిర్ణయానికి తమ నిర్ణయం చేసింది.