

Longing to Dance

Stories of Kuchipudi Brahmin Women

The Hyderabad-based Kuchipudi dance teacher Balatripurasundari learned to dance in secret. As the youngest daughter of internationally acclaimed Kuchipudi dance guru Vempati Chinna Satyam, Baliakka (as she is commonly called) was never encouraged by her father to dance. In fact, she was overtly discouraged from dancing on the basis that it might diminish her marriage prospects in the future and cause unnecessary hardships. Nonetheless, Baliakka learned by watching her father train hundreds of girls in his Madras-based dance institution, the Kuchipudi Art Academy (KAA). Likening herself to Ekalavya, the outcast student of Drona from the epic *Mahābhārata*, who learned archery in secret, Baliakka would sneak into the back of her father's dance classroom, practice facial expressions in front of the bathroom mirror, and fashion Kuchipudi gestures (*mudras*) underneath her blanket at night. Baliakka *longed* to dance like the other girls at her father's dance school, but her desire never won her father's approval because, according to Kuchipudi *sāmpradāyam* (tradition), brahmin girls from the Kuchipudi village cannot and do not dance.

This chapter focuses on the narratives of brahmin women belonging to hereditary Kuchipudi village families who have been overtly excluded from the embodied labor of performance. Unlike the brahmin men of the Kuchipudi village who are all associated with dance in some capacity, Kuchipudi brahmin women have no such performative roles to play. Kuchipudi brahmin women's bodies are deemed unsuitable for the labor of Indian dance and are, therefore, proscribed from the "sweat, blood, tears, slipping or stained saris, callused feet, missteps, or familiar gestures" that dance entails (Srinivasan 2012, 8). Kuchipudi brahmin women are neither the bearers of *sāmpradāyam* in the manner of their fathers, brothers, and

sons, nor are they the embodiments of an idealized middle-class Indian womanhood in the manner of their dancing female counterparts. But, as upper-caste brahmin women, they retain a position of privilege, particularly in comparison to *devadāsīs* who have been overtly marginalized in postcolonial South India (Soneji 2012; Ramberg 2014). As a result, they occupy an uneasy interstice as brahmin women whose caste and gender enable their position of exclusion.

The women described in this chapter exemplify a range of relationships with Kuchipudi dance. While some find meaning in alternate forms of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977, 1989) such as religious ritual, others long to participate in dance as students, teachers, or even observers. These aspirations often remain unfulfilled within the brahminical and patriarchal model of Kuchipudi village life, which precludes brahmin women's bodies from entering the performative sphere. In contrast to impersonating elaborate *vēṣams* on stage like the brahmin men of the village, Kuchipudi brahmin women are cast as figures with wooden faces, *cekka mohālu*, who must struggle to articulate a recognizable sense of self, or personation (Mankekar 2015, 190). Yet, the stories of Kuchipudi brahmin women like Baliakka reveal the contingency of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the urban and transnational landscape of Kuchipudi dance.

KUCHIPUDI BRAHMIN WOMEN: DISCOURSES OF EXCLUSION

As already noted in earlier chapters of this book, the village of Kuchipudi is home to a community of Vaidiki brahmin families who have been associated with the eponymous dance form of Kuchipudi for several generations. According to a property dispute in 1763, fifteen brahmin families with surnames such as Bhagavatula, Vedantam, and Vempati were named as the legitimate residents of the Kuchipudi village, and their descendants continue to live in the village today (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 40). Citing reasons of female menstruation and women's restricted movement in the public sphere, Kuchipudi brahmin men have overtly excluded women from hereditary brahmin families from participating in dance. This practice of exclusion continues in the Kuchipudi village today, and I found no example of a Kuchipudi brahmin woman who dances professionally in public in the contemporary period. The omission of Kuchipudi brahmin women's voices and bodies goes beyond dance performance; all scholarly accounts, from both Indian and American academic contexts, also overlook the roles and lives of Kuchipudi brahmin women in studies of Kuchipudi dance.

I too was susceptible to such oversight. Initially, I conceived of this project as an ethnography of the hereditary brahmin men of the Kuchipudi village with a particular focus on the practice of impersonation. However, during my fieldwork, I developed and sustained a close relationship with Chavali Balatripurasundari

(Baliakka), the third daughter of well-known Kuchipudi guru Vempati Chinna Satyam. I first met Baliakka in her Hyderabad flat in September 2009 when I asked her to review dance items from her father's repertoire. New to Hyderabad and in the process of establishing fieldwork contacts, I wanted to keep up with my dance practice, especially before moving to the Kuchipudi village later that year. When she came to know that I was a student of Sasikala Penumarthi, a well-known Atlanta-based dancer who trained under her father in the 1980s, Baliakka expressed hesitation. "What can I teach you?" she asked nervously. Despite her initial reluctance, I found Baliakka to be an exceptionally talented teacher. She would spend countless hours correcting each movement and every expression until she was satisfied that I performed an item exactly in the style of her father's choreography.

After morning classes, Baliakka always invited me to her flat to share a meal and watch videos of items and dance dramas from her extensive VHS and VCD archive. Sitting comfortably on the living room couch with cups of strong filter coffee in hand, Baliakka and I spent countless afternoons watching and talking about dance. Baliakka shared with me her love of her father's choreography, her admiration for my Atlanta-based teacher Sasikala, and her regret that she had never been formally trained. I grew to cherish these moments and found myself making excuses to return to Baliakka's house whenever possible. My great-aunt, with whom I usually stay in Hyderabad, learned not to expect me home for lunch and sometimes even dinner. "You'll be at Baliakka's, right?" my great-aunt would often ask with exasperation. These afternoon conversations with Baliakka continued anytime I came to Hyderabad, whether it was for weekend visits from the Kuchipudi village or many years later to introduce Baliakka to my children.

Relevant to this discussion is Joyce Flueckiger's (2013) analysis of the guising practices of the Gangamma *jātara*, a weeklong festival in honor of the regional goddess Gangamma in the temple town of Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh. The Gangamma *jātara* centers around the public guising practices of men: male members of the Kaikala family of weavers ritually don the guises of the goddess during the Gangamma *jātara*, while lay male participants publicly don the *strī-vēṣam* to "get a corner on women's *shakti* [power]" (Flueckiger 2013, 65). Rather than focusing solely on these public guising practices, Flueckiger decenters the male body in *vēṣam* by also examining how lay women participate in the Gangamma festival, whether it is through applying turmeric (*pasupu*) on their faces or cooking a dish of rice and lentils (*poṅgal*) in the temple courtyard (18–19, 50).

Although I was influenced by Flueckiger's research on the Gangamma *jātara*, as well as the work of anthropologists Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold (1994), I initially did not conceive of my time with Baliakka as part of my "real" fieldwork. However, the more I learned of Baliakka's story, the more I realized that there was a "hidden transcript" (Raheja and Gold 1994, 26) of brahmin women's speech that is unaccounted for in broader scholarship on Kuchipudi dance. Tulasi Srinivas (2018)

notes that through the course of her interactions with women at Hindu temples in the Malleshwaram neighborhood in contemporary Bangalore, she came to understand new perspectives on gender and caste. Srinivas writes, “My appreciation of these women grew as time passed and I was privy to the multiplicity of roles and subjectivities they inhabited. I came to understand from them all the hierarchies, including caste and gender, were capable of being upturned, or ‘adjusted’” (23). In a similar vein, during the course of my fieldwork I came to realize that to understand village brahmin masculinity in all its constraints, I needed to decenter the male body in *vēṣam* and account for the experiences of the women from hereditary village families. And, perhaps more importantly, Baliakka’s was a story that needed to be told.

In 2014, I returned to India to conduct follow-up interviews with ten Kuchipudi brahmin women living in the Kuchipudi village and the urban centers of Vijayawada, Hyderabad, and Chennai. During this follow-up visit, I recorded a formal interview with Baliakka, in which she shared her experiences of learning to dance in secret at the KAA. In what follows, I have selected the accounts of four women: Vedantam Rajyalakshmi and Vedantam Lakshminarasamma, who reside in the village, and Vempati Swarajyalakshmi and Vempati Balatripurasundari (Baliakka), who reside in the urban centers of Chennai and Hyderabad, respectively. Baliakka’s story is both the impetus and centerpiece of this chapter.

VEDANTAM RAJYALAKSHMI

Vedantam Rajyalakshmi is an energetic woman in her sixties living in the village of Kuchipudi.¹ She is the wife of the late Kuchipudi guru Vedantam Rattayya Sarma and the mother of younger professional dancers Venku and Raghava discussed in chapters 2 and 4, respectively. Rajyalakshmi, like many of her female counterparts living in the village, was born in Kuchipudi and married into a Kuchipudi brahmin family, a practice idiosyncratic to marital customs in northern India where village exogamy is dominant (Raheja and Gold 1994).² In southern India, more broadly, kinship systems usually follow a model of cross-cousin marriage: a man can marry a woman who is his father’s sister’s daughter, his mother’s brother’s daughter, or in rarer cases, his own sister’s daughter (Trawick 1992, 118).³ Kuchipudi’s *agrahāram*, or brahmin enclave, has maintained an endogamous kinship system in which cross-cousin marriage is preferred; marriage to women outside the village is relatively uncommon, although this practice is changing in recent years.⁴ This closed system of marriage results in women having multiple connections to dance; many of the women I interviewed not only have husbands who are professionally tied to dance in some capacity, but also fathers, uncles, brothers, and sons who are professional dancers, teachers, and/or musicians. These women would often take great pains to outline these associations to dance from their natal homes, noting whether their father or uncle were experts in dance.

The closed system of marriage also results in multiple layers of exclusion for the brahmin women of the Kuchipudi village. In childhood, as daughters and sisters of Kuchipudi brahmin men, girls are overtly excluded from learning dance, and in adulthood, as wives and mothers, they are not only restricted from dancing but also discouraged from watching dance performances. As evidence of this, Rajyalakshmi describes her childhood:

None of my sisters learned to dance. I'm the only one who learned. Girls never used to learn in those days. My mother used to get angry, but I used to sneak out and learn. My mother beat me with a broomstick sometimes. Even then I went and learned. Krishna Sarma Garu [a Kuchipudi guru] shouted and told me not to come. And Parvatisam Garu [another Kuchipudi guru] beat me up. My father's younger brother Rajagopalam Babai and I went and learned to dance . . . After I kept getting beatings, I finally stopped.

Later in our conversation, Rajyalakshmi told me that Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao, an elite Telugu proponent of Kuchipudi dance, began offering village brahmin girls five *paisa* (five cents) a day to learn. Despite this monetary incentive, no girls came forth to dance. Rajyalakshmi herself received money on two occasions, but her interest waned when her teacher shouted at her and asked her why she had come to dance. According to Rajyalakshmi, even one rupee would not be enough to motivate girls to learn in those days.

Although beaten for attempting to participate in dance, Rajyalakshmi still desired to perform the coveted role of Satyabhama in *Bhāmākalāpam*:

After that, Chinta Krishna Murthy Garu used to teach outside on the street. He used to teach *Bhāmākalāpam* to Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma. I learned by watching him. I used to come home and practice saying, "I am Bhama, I am Satyabhama." However, I didn't give any programs. I also used to get excited that I too could dance. In those days, in our village, girls were not allowed to go outside or perform on the stage. Even now, girls don't perform. Which girls in this village have performed on the stage? There's no girl among our people. Even though outsiders are now coming and learning, among our families, there are no girls who perform.

Rajyalakshmi's description of ongoing exclusion from dance is evidenced by the fact that during my follow-up fieldwork, I could find no example of a girl or woman from a hereditary Kuchipudi family who performs professionally in public. Although village girls may be encouraged to *learn* dance, which was the case during my experience of learning at the Siddhendra Kalakshetra (the village's government-run dance institute), no girls were ever encouraged to become professional dancers or dance teachers. Furthermore, no female dancers were ever promoted to enact the lead role of Satyabhama in village productions of *Bhāmākalāpam*. In the village, Satyabhama is always circumscribed to the brahmin male body.



FIGURE 21. Vedantam Rajyalakshmi in her home in the Kuchipudi village. Photo by author.

Rajyalakshmi was not only excluded from *learning* Kuchipudi as a young girl but was also restricted from *watching* Kuchipudi performances as a married woman. Rajyalakshmi's late husband Vedantam Rattayya Sarma was a stalwart performer in the Kuchipudi village and known for his enactments of lead male characters such as Balicakravarti and Banasura. When her husband was performing in the open-air stage in the center of the village, Rajyalakshmi would secretly go to watch his performances, hiding behind a pillar so that no one could see. As Rajyalakshmi relates:

I used to sneak out and watch my husband perform from a secret place and come running home before he came back. When he came back, he would say, "You were there. You came to see my performance." When I said I didn't go, he would say, "No, I saw you from the stage." That's how he would fight with me as soon as he came home. But that's how I would sneak out and watch him. I used to watch from behind a pillar and come back before the last scene ended, before everyone left. After that, he used to finish the program, and I had to cook dinner for all of the performers.

By preventing his wife from attending his performances, Rattayya Sarma limited Rajyalakshmi to the domestic sphere, while coding public dance performance as exclusively male.

Spanning from the government-run dance institution, the Siddhendra Kalakshetra, near the entrance of the village to the open-air stage adjacent to the Ramalingeshvara temple in the heart of the village, most public spaces in Kuchipudi are intended for village brahmin men to teach classes and stage performances. Brahmin women, by comparison, are limited in their ability to freely interact with these spaces; even today, they might be present as audience members in a village performance, but they are rarely found in the Siddhendra Kalakshetra dance classrooms or other such public spaces, aside from the village temple. Like homosocial space in Moroccan society described by Fatima Mernissi (1987, 140), the gendering of space in the Kuchipudi village is drawn along the boundaries of public and private domains. Nevertheless, Rajyalakshmi's presence peeping from behind the pillar to watch her husband's performance demonstrates that the dichotomy between public and private is not always neatly defined (Lal 2005, 14–15).

VEDANTAM LAKSHMINARASAMMA

Vedantam Lakshminarasamma, also a resident of the Kuchipudi village, is the wife of Kuchipudi impersonator Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, who passed away in 2012 (two years before my interview with her).⁵ Unlike Rajyalakshmi, who was eager to speak about her experiences of learning dance, Lakshminarasamma was far more reluctant. Her reticence surprised me, especially given her husband's

fame and ongoing posthumous reputation in Kuchipudi dance circles. In our relatively short conversation, Lakshminarasamma noted that Satyanarayana Sarma had been trained not only by his older brother, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma, and another well-known village guru, Chinta Krishna Murthy, but also by her own father, Pasumarti Kondala Rao, thus demonstrating her interconnectedness with dance through multiple layers of kinship.

Like Rajyalakshmi, Lakshminarasamma also described that her husband never encouraged her to attend his performances, especially those occurring out of town, although she did attend his local performances:

I never went anywhere if performances were happening outside the village. I only attended those performances that took place in our village, only those performances that took place in the Siddhendra Kalakshetra. Aside from that, he never used to take me anywhere, nor was I in the habit of going anywhere. That's how things were.

Lakshminarasamma's matter-of-fact and relatively terse responses again surprised me, especially in contrast to Satyanarayana Sarma's tendency to "breakthrough" into full performance (Hymes 2015, 31) in many of his formal and informal interviews (see introduction and chapter 2).

Notably, Lakshminarasamma's reluctance to speak may have been because Pasumarti Mrutyumjaya (Mutyam), a rising brahmin male performer in his mid-thirties from the Kuchipudi village, was present during the interview. Mutyam and I had become close friends during my fieldwork, and when he volunteered to introduce me to the women of the village in my return visit in 2014, I welcomed his presence, especially given his familiarity with the various brahmin households. Together, Mutyam and I conducted eight interviews with brahmin women from the village, including with Rajyalakshmi, Lakshminarasamma, and Swarajyalakshmi discussed in this chapter.⁶ During the interviews we conducted together, I would begin by asking open-ended questions about a woman's family, domestic obligations, and experiences with dance. However, the more interviews we conducted together, the more Mutyam began to take over the role of interviewer, rapidly asking about a woman's knowledge of movement, pedagogy, and music. Mutyam would often conclude an interview by asking a woman to sing a line or two from a song she may have heard from watching and listening to the men around. Most women succinctly evaded his questions by simply stating, "I don't know anything."

These interview dynamics are apparent in the following conversation between Mutyam and Lakshminarasamma:

Mutyam: When [Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma] would practice singing for dance dramas, did you ever listen and sing along with him?

Lakshminarasamma: What do I know about that?

Mutyam: I mean, did you ever listen and learn?

Lakshminarasamma: I never used to sing. I don't know anything about that.

Mutyam: Can you sing a couple of lines from whatever you know?

Lakshminarasamma: There's nothing there. I don't know.

Mutyam: Did you ever learn dance or music?

Lakshminarasamma: I never learned anything. He used to come and go, but I never learned anything.

Mutyam: Did you ever want to learn dance or music?

Lakshminarasamma: I never had a desire to learn.

Mutyam repeated a similar set of questions at the end of our interview with Lakshminarasamma, entreating her to sing at least one line from *Bhāmākalāpam* or anything else she had heard while cooking in the kitchen. She responded again by simply stating, "I don't know anything." Lakshminarasamma's refusal to engage in the dance questions set forth by Mutyam contrasted with Rajyalakshmi, who was fully willing to outline her attempts and impediments in dance training.

Mutyam's presence as a village brahmin male dancer indisputably created a power dynamic in our interviews that seemed to have deterred many of the women from speaking freely. In their seminal ethnographic study of North Indian women's songs, Raheja and Gold (1994, 23) offer a relevant discussion about power relations in the interview context:

[W]omen's speech, like all speech, is produced in specific historical and micropolitical contexts, and that what women will say reflects the power relationships implicit in the elicitation situation, and their own perceptions of what their speech will accomplish. If we rely only on women's interview statements, or on our observations of women's public adherence to the norms of silence and submission, we run the risk of assuming that women are incapable of using verbal strategies to oppose that dominant ideology.

Raheja and Gold instead focus on Indian women's expressive traditions—that is, songs and narratives—to examine modes of resistance implicit in the "hidden transcript" of women's speech (26). Aware of Raheja and Gold's robust examination of women's expressive traditions, I recognize the limitations of this interview conducted with Mutyam, which did not explore alternative forms of speech, like songs. By grounding the discourse in dance, Mutyam created a power dynamic in the interview that seemed to preclude Lakshminarasamma's participation. Lakshminarasamma's refusal to respond to Mutyam's questions also flags that the discursive framework of dance is not the only means by which these women construct meaning within quotidian Kuchipudi life, a point that is also apparent in the interview with Swarajyalakshmi.

VEMPATI SWARAJYALAKSHMI

I interviewed Vempati Swarajyalakshmi, the wife of renowned dance guru Vempati Chinna Satyam, in her home above the KAA in Chennai one year before her death in 2015. I also interacted with Swarajyalakshmi frequently during my fieldwork in the KAA in 2010, spending most afternoons in her upstairs residence in between morning and evening dance classes. While the direct quotations are from my 2014 interview with Swarajyalakshmi (conducted with Mutyam), my familiarity with her domestic life and daily routines from previous encounters during fieldwork also informs my discussion in this section.

Swarajyalakshmi's situation is, in many ways, different from those of her counterparts in the Kuchipudi village. Born to a brahmin family from a neighboring village, Swarajyalakshmi only came to the Kuchipudi village after her marriage in 1952. She resided there for three years while Chinna Satyam pursued his career in the burgeoning Madras film industry, and then moved to the city along with her mother-in-law, sisters-in-law, and nephew. When in Madras, Swarajyalakshmi lived with her extended family in a cramped apartment, which often housed many other relatives. A few years after her arrival to Madras, the whole family moved to Panagal Park, an area of the city where Chinna Satyam first established the KAA. At the time, the KAA functioned not only as a dance space, but also as Chinna Satyam's residence where he lived with his wife, five children, and other members of his extended family. The intermingling of the performative and the domestic extends to the current location of the KAA in R.A. Puram (another area in present-day Chennai), in which the bottom floor is the dance hall and the top floor serves as the residence for the Vempati family.

Living in an urban dance institute for most of her life, Swarajyalakshmi has had broad exposure to dance for decades. The rupture between domestic and performative spaces that characterizes the Kuchipudi village is absent in the KAA. Swarajyalakshmi and her sister-in-law were often responsible for feeding not only her family, but also the several dancers who resided in the KAA, including Kuchipudi village brahmins and any other visiting guests. In the Panagal Park location of the KAA, Swarajyalakshmi and other members of the Vempati family would sleep in the large dance hall at night, after Chinna Satyam conducted daylong lessons with scores of students. In other words, the KAA functioned as a dance institute by day and domestic space by night.

Swarajyalakshmi was thus surrounded by dance day in and day out, and although she herself did not learn to dance, she was able to articulate the details of her husband's career, including the names of dancers at the KAA, dates of performances, and locations of performances, to exactitude. Nevertheless, she was not always encouraged to attend these performances alongside her husband: "There was no reason to go. He never used to take me, nor did I ever want to go. I never used to ask him. My only job was to bow my head and say yes to whatever [my husband] said." Yet, despite this outright claim of exclusion and submission,

Swarajyalakshmi noted that later in her life, she did accompany her husband to performances, a shift that she credited to organizers who specially invited her to attend. She traveled with him to the Kuchipudi village and the urban centers of Mumbai, Mathura, Srirangam, and Trivandram (now Thiruvananthapuram) in India; she also traveled abroad with him, including trips to Sri Lanka and the United States.

Despite her attendance at some of her husband's performances, Swarajyalakshmi mirrored Lakshminarasamma in her reluctance to sing any elements from her husband's repertoire, particularly in response to questions posed by Mutyam.

Mutyam: Do you know any songs from his dance dramas? Normally, you would have been listening to the songs while cooking or sleeping.

Swarajyalakshmi: My songs are the ones that women sing in the house.

Mutyam: Women's songs are fine, but do you know any songs from [your husband's] dance dramas? Do you know any of those songs that he might have been humming during the day?

Author: Any songs are fine, like any woman's songs or a song from a dance item, perhaps.

Swarajyalakshmi: I don't know any songs used for dance items. I can't sing out loud. I'm not trained in *saṅgītam* [classical music]. I used to watch [my husband's] items, but never sing them. I only sing songs for god, or songs to be sung on Fridays, like *Lalitā Sahasranāma*. I used to sing those and cook.

Swarajyalakshmi deftly pointed to women's devotional songs, namely *Lalitā Sahasranāma* (One Thousand Names of Goddess Lakshmi), as a form of religious meaning, or symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1977, 1989), that subtly supersedes the value attributed to dance and music. Overtly excluded from the sphere of performance, Swarajyalakshmi turned to acts of religious devotionism as forms of meaning-making in her everyday context (Pearson 1996).⁷

In her study of the Arangetram, the debut dance performance prominent in contemporary forms of Bharatanatyam in India and the American diaspora, Arthi Devarajan (2011, 5) draws on the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1989) to analyze the various threads of capital present in Indian dance performance: "The capital at work in this economy is composed of individual and collective prestige, Hindu and Indian cultural narratives, symbolic capital and material wealth, personal identity and performed characters, and insider and outsider status within cultural, practice-oriented interpretive communities." Devarajan (2011, 11) reads both training and performance as essential components in the pedagogical culture of dance as *habitus*, or "a social system wherein there are goals, *praxes*, priorities, social codes and hierarchies understood commonly by all members of the

community (Bourdieu 1977: 72, 82–85).” The Arangetram provides an aspiring dancer with the symbolic capital that enables her to move upward in her dance community, while also training her body in the *habitus* that inculcates a particular embodied ideal envisioned in a particular character, such as Satyabhama (Devarajan 2011, 20, 28).⁸

Devarajan’s interpretation of symbolic capital is helpful to frame the aforementioned narratives of Kuchipudi brahmin women. While some women from village brahmin families, such as Rajyalakshmi, desire to participate in the economy of dance and thus achieve a level of symbolic capital akin to their male counterparts, others like Swarajyalakshmi veer toward alternative expressions of meaning, namely religious capital through women’s ritual songs. In his discussion of Telugu brahmin women’s oral tradition of the *Rāmāyana*, Velcheru Narayana Rao (1991, 133) notes that “[t]he women who sing these songs have not sought to overthrow the male-dominated family structure; they would rather work within it. They have no interest in direct confrontation with authority; their interest, rather, is in making room for themselves to move.” Like the women of Narayana Rao’s study, Swarajyalakshmi uses religious songs as a form of ritual capital that differs from the symbolic capital acquired through embodied dance performance. Swarajyalakshmi’s responses to Mutyam’s questions express a subtle form of resistance to the world of dance, suggesting alternative forms of meaning-making in quotidian Kuchipudi life. Such alternative modes of meaning are not present, however, in the perspectives of Swarajyalakshmi’s daughter, Balatripurasundari. Baliakka, who flatly refused to have Mutyam present during our recorded interview, expressed a longing to participate in the embodied labors of dance training and performance.

CHAVALI BALATRIPURASUNDARI

Visitors to Chinna Satyam’s KAA in Panagal Park in the 1970s and 1980s would have witnessed rows and rows of female dancing bodies, interspersed with a few male dancers, all replicating the neat lines and stylistic bends of Chinna Satyam’s newly envisioned Kuchipudi aesthetics. What visitors would not have found, however, were Chinna Satyam’s own daughters dancing alongside his female students. According to his third and youngest daughter Baliakka, Chinna Satyam vociferously discouraged his daughters and nieces from learning dance, worried that participation in public dance performance might interfere with their future marriage proposals. Although leaving the Kuchipudi village decades earlier, Chinna Satyam still adhered to the long-standing practice of excluding Kuchipudi brahmin women from performance. Chinna Satyam may have trained hundreds of female dancers for decades, but he never formally taught any female member of his family. Baliakka’s mother Swarajyalakshmi articulated the reasons for her husband’s choice not to teach the girls in his family:

Author: Why didn't Chinna Satyam Garu agree to teaching girls from his family?

Swarajyalakshmi: He would say, "We have to get our girls married. If they become crazy for dance, their future husband or future in-laws might not like it and cause trouble. What's the point of that?" Thinking all of these things, he always used to say that girls should not be taught to dance.

Author: But girls from other families could learn, right?

Swarajyalakshmi: Other girls might learn. They used to come and go, and we don't know if they had any troubles or not. But he never taught our girls. In the Kuchipudi village, women do not learn to dance.

Baliakka, whose perspectives on dance informed much of my knowledge of Kuchipudi brahmin women's experiences during my fieldwork, also noted similar reasons during our formal interview in 2014.⁹ She speculated on her father's reasons for preventing her and her sisters from participating in dance:

My father didn't teach us. He didn't encourage us. That's because he struggled ever since his childhood to get into this field. He struggled a lot, and everyone knows about that. Because he struggled, he didn't want his children to struggle. Even though he knew we were interested, he would avoid us. Also, because we're girls, and we would have to get married. He would think, "Will they get married? What troubles will other people give them?" and wouldn't encourage us. He knew that we really liked dance. That's why he thought if he cut our interest in the beginning, it wouldn't develop. Even though he didn't outwardly encourage us, our foundation fell there, near him [even after our marriage].

Chinna Satyam's responses seem particularly incongruous to the middle-class sentiment of Madras in the mid-twentieth century, in which middle-class and upper-caste women increasingly began to participate in South Indian dance (Meduri 1988). In fact, many of the prominent dancers in Chinna Satyam's academy were also from Telugu brahmin families, revealing the paradox underlying Chinna Satyam's refusal to teach his own daughters to dance. Although his institution enabled the rise of middle-class and upper-caste women's participation in urban Kuchipudi dance, he refused to teach his own daughters because of the very fact that they were technically considered to be Kuchipudi village brahmin women even in a cosmopolitan context.

This exclusion from dance was keenly felt by Baliakka. Growing up in the KAA in the 1970s, Baliakka was surrounded by an atmosphere of dance from morning until night. Whether it was watching her father's early morning choreography sessions or listening to the sounds of rehearsal upon coming home from school, Baliakka lived in a world immersed in dance. Although her father refused to

teach her and her siblings, Baliakka did learn by intense observation and occasional practice. She spent most of her free time in her father's dance classrooms and would play the *tānpura* [stringed instrument] to accompany her father and Kanaka Durga, the Karnatak vocalist employed to sing dance items during classes. Baliakka describes these moments as follows:

While my father was teaching, I'd play the *tānpura*, and watch him and listen to him. That's how I learned. It's like Ekalavya. Ekalavya also didn't learn from his guru. He learned the *vidyā* [knowledge] in secret. Like that, when my father was teaching his students, I'd sit on the side and observe how he was teaching . . . After the item was over, I would go upstairs into a room and close the door so that no one could watch and quickly practice the movements myself. I would only get satisfaction when I could do the movements correctly. Then, I'd sneak back downstairs without anyone knowing and sit again and play the *tānpura*.

Ekalavya, the son of the chief of the Nishadas (a clan of hunters), is a well-known character from the Sanskrit epic *Mahābhārata* who was rejected by Drona, the teacher of the Pandavas and Kauravas (the main protagonists of the epic). Mastering the skills of archery on his own, Ekalavya went before Drona, asking for his guidance once more. Drona agreed, demanding a seemingly impossible *dikṣā* (fee) from Ekalavya:

Droṇa replied, "Give me your thumb!" And hearing Droṇa's harsh command, Ekalavya kept his promise; forever devoted to the truth, with a happy face and unburdened mind, he cut off his thumb without a moment's hesitation and gave it to Droṇa. When thereafter the Niṣāda [Ekalavya] shot with his fingers, he was no longer as fast as he had been before (*Mahābhārata* 1(7)123.35–40).¹⁰

Baliakka's invocation of Ekalavya underscores her father's lack of approval; like Ekalavya, who famously cut off his thumb after he learned to master archery without his guru's help, Baliakka learned to dance without her father's consent. Also, like Ekalavya, Baliakka was never formally initiated in dance by her father, a point that she repeatedly references when comparing herself to his other female students.

The 1970s was likely the most generative period of Chinna Satyam's career, and he often spent many early mornings in the small hut behind the KAA complex in Panagal Park choreographing new dance items and dance dramas. Chinna Satyam never allowed anyone to directly watch these choreography sessions, a point that was reiterated to me by both Baliakka and her younger brother Vempati Ravi Shankar.¹¹ Baliakka recalls her furtive attempts to watch her father's choreography, along with her siblings:

I used to watch when my father choreographed. Ever since we were little, we used to watch him teach, and watched how he choreographed . . . The hut [in the back of

the academy where he did choreography] used to have thatched walls, kind of like a fence. There were holes in the walls. We would sit by those holes and watch him compose. He never wanted anyone sitting near him while he was composing because they might disturb him . . . It was just him and the student. He never liked it if anyone extra sat with him. That's why he never let anyone in to watch in case they would disturb him. But we really wanted to watch. So, we used to sneak on the paths and watch from those holes. If he heard any footsteps, he'd shouted, "Who's there?" and we'd quickly run away.

Baliakka could only watch her father's secret choreography sessions through holes in the hut left by rodents or, occasionally, when serving tea or water to her father and the student. Her body as a dancer, however, was never legitimated in this choreography space.

Occasionally, however, Baliakka did have the opportunity to dance alongside the other students by sneaking her way into the back of a crowded dance classroom so that no one would notice. If her father happened to see her standing at the end of the long line of students, he would stop the class at once and say with a mocking tone: "Is there anyone else? Are the pots and pans going to dance too? Go and call your mother. She'll also dance . . . Get out of here!" Baliakka would run crying to her mother, who would only admonish her for trying to dance in the first place:

If I ever went inside and told my mother, she would say: "Are you going to do any programs? What's the point? Why do you want to make your father angry? Don't do it. Just watch." My mother would say that. But I was overcome with that desire to dance. I always thought we should dance. That's why sometimes when I was sleeping at night after eating, I'd pull the blanket all the way over my head, and move my hands, sing the songs, and do the expressions. I'd do actions inside my blanket. That's how. And no one should be able to see what I was doing. If they saw, my father might get angry that I was trying to dance.

These secret practices became the only way for Baliakka to discipline her body in the labors of Chinna Satyam's cosmopolitan Kuchipudi. In a similar vein, Baliakka relayed that sometimes she would lock herself in a dressing room and practice facial expressions in front of the mirror, pretending to be a student scolded by her father. Alternating between first-person singular ("I") and first-person plural ("we"), she states:

There used to be a dressing room. We'd go there and shut the door so that no one could watch. In that room, there was a small mirror. Thinking of how he did the movements and how he did the expressions, we'd look into the mirror and do the movements. We'd remember how our father would get mad if a student didn't do a movement correctly, as he had envisioned it. We'd remember how he'd get irritated

and how he'd get angry. We also used to hear all of those words. We used to listen to those conversations. Listening to them, we used to go to our room, and I'd pretend like I was like my father scolding a student. We could imitate our father, having watched him since we were young. He was who we would look at. He was our role model. He was the one who we admired.¹²

Although excluded from dance by her father, Baliakka clearly envisions Chinna Satyam as her role model; her attempts to *impersonate* him in the mirror enabled her to experience the student-teacher relationship from which she was excluded.

Although Chinna Satyam discouraged all his children from dancing, he eventually began teaching his younger son Ravi Shankar, whose exceptional talents suggested a promising future as a professional dancer. Seeing her younger brother encouraged to dance, Baliakka began to question her father as to why she could not also learn. Chinna Satyam responded with the same stock answers regarding marriage proposals and future hardships, noting that it was not Kuchipudi *sāmpradāyam* (tradition) to teach brahmin girls.

But he also discouraged Baliakka by simply saying about her and her sisters: "Why do you want to dance? You all have wooden faces (*cekka mohālu*). Your faces don't suit dance." Chinna Satyam's disapproving words regarding his daughters' expressionless, wooden faces, their *cekka mohālu*, shapes how Baliakka views herself as a dancer, even in her adult life. Although she now runs her own dance school in Hyderabad, Abhinayavani Nritya Niketan, she rarely performs in public or even practices in front of her students.¹³ Proscribed from the "sweat, blood, tears, slipping or stained saris, callused feet, missteps, or familiar gestures" (Srinivasan 2012, 8) that dance entails, particularly the symbolic capital accrued through public performance, Baliakka limits herself to teaching students and only occasionally performs in *vēṣam* for her brother Ravi Shankar's dance dramas. She describes her hesitation when teaching and occasionally performing, again alternating between first-person plural and singular:

We would feel nervous even to dance among four people. Even if we teach with great concentration and confidence, we feel very shy to dance, we feel embarrassed. Recently, my younger brother has been doing my father's ballets, and I've been doing some small, small roles. I have stage fear even to do those small roles. I'm very scared to get onstage.

During my fieldwork, Baliakka was often reluctant to demonstrate expressions or dance in front of me and her other students, despite her long-standing embodied knowledge of Chinna Satyam's style of Kuchipudi.

In fact, Baliakka stands alone as the sole Kuchipudi teacher who actively attempts to adhere with exactitude to Chinna Satyam's choreography. Most other

dance teachers I have trained under in the United States and India draw on their own embodied memories of dancing under Chinna Satyam years beforehand, which results in a wide variety of interpretations even for a single movement. By contrast, Baliakka's lack of formal training under her father prompts her to seek out the "correct" rendering of a particular movement, and she spends most of her free time watching video recordings of Chinna Satyam's dance dramas and solo items. Baliakka's repertoire remains limited, for the most part, to Chinna Satyam's choreography as she maintains his legacy through her students, even after his death.

Although Chinna Satyam was aware of Baliakka's efforts in teaching, he never fully gave support to her in the way that he did to his sons, who took over running the KAA following his death in 2012. In the reported speech of Baliakka's mother, Swarajyalakshmi, Chinna Satyam stated that "if [Baliakka] likes teaching dance, then let her do it. If not, she shouldn't." Baliakka acknowledges the lack of her father's overt approval, especially in comparison to the degree of support given to her brother Ravi Shankar. Yet, she stands alone as one of the few examples of Kuchipudi brahmin women who participate in Kuchipudi dance professionally. The only other example is Baliakka's older sister Kameshwari, who also runs a nearby dance school in Hyderabad. Baliakka often aids Kameshwari in dance-related questions, and their students collectively perform together throughout the year. During my fieldwork, Baliakka's continued passion for dance was palpable, and she expressed an eagerness for detailing her experiences and knowledge of Chinna Satyam's oeuvre. Underlying her enthusiasm, however, was a distinct wistfulness; Baliakka had longed to be recognized by her father and her dance community in the manner of his other female students, including my own dance teacher of two decades, Sasikala Penumarthi.

As a Kuchipudi brahmin woman, however, Baliakka can never fully embody the idealized middle-class womanhood central to postcolonial forms of "classical" Indian dance (Srinivasan 2012, 36). Baliakka can never be like the other female dancers at the KAA who gained a reputation for public performance and then went on to establish their own globally recognized dance schools. Proscribed from performance since childhood, Baliakka's authority in dance remains limited to replicating as precisely as possible her father's choreography; it can never be achieved by performing herself. Baliakka's inherited vision of her *cekka moham*, her ostensibly wooden face, also prevents her from becoming the ideal Kuchipudi female dancer in the eyes of her father and the Kuchipudi brahmin community, thereby doubly excluding her from the symbolic capital of public dance performance. This double exclusion is characteristic not only of Kuchipudi brahmin women, but also of *devadāsīs* across South India.



FIGURE 22. Chavali Balatripurasundari in her home in Hyderabad. Photo by author.

SPEAKING FROM LIMINAL SPACES: *DEVADĀSĪS* AND
KUCHIPUDI BRAHMIN WOMEN IN SOUTH INDIA

Narratives of exclusion not only characterize the stories of Kuchipudi brahmin women, but also the lives of *devadāsīs* across South India who have been barred from performance due to extensive colonial and postcolonial reform efforts (see introduction). In his ethnographic work with *devadāsīs* in Tamil- and Telugu-speaking South India, Daves Soneji (2012) describes *devadāsī* subjectivities as unfinished, caught between a nostalgic colonial past and an evolving postcolonial present. Although banned from dancing in temple or salon contexts due to state legislative reforms, *devadāsī* women's bodies still house the residual memories of performance. As an example, Soneji turns to R. Muttukkannammal, a *devadāsī* woman from the Tamil town of Viralimalai who performs, among other pieces, the long-forgotten *noṭṭusvaram*, or “note” song, based on Irish marching-band tunes, and *mōṭi*, a hybrid Hindi-Tamil “drinking song” (181).¹⁴ For Muttukkannammal, performing the dance pieces *noṭṭusvaram* and *mōṭi* is not only a mode of remembering the past, but also an articulation of a sense of self. Drawing on the words of Muttukkannammal, Soneji argues that “mnemonic iteration through the act of performance is effective for *devadāsīs* at the level of individual identity” (188). In other words, remembering the past through embodied performance serves to construct selfhood in the present.

Soneji underscores the connection between memory, performance, and selfhood in his ethnographic work with Telugu-speaking *kalāvāntulu* (Telugu for *devadāsī*) women from the East Godavari district:

For some women in courtesan communities today, however, the [courtesan dance] repertoire is used as a mode of telling; it is mobilized to consolidate an identity they can live with. What is articulated by women in the Godavari delta is, I think, an alternative mode of being, an identity that uses the past in order to establish a relationship with themselves in the present. (190)

These accounts of *devadāsī/kalāvāntulu* memory reveal a collective nostalgia which “serves as a mode of suspending the past in a way that makes it available and affective for the shaping of a contemporary selfhood” (213). For these *devadāsīs*, personation, in the words of Purnima Mankekar (2015, 190), is grounded in recollections of an embodied past of performance, a past they are prohibited from enacting in the present.

In her ethnographic work with *jōgatis*, South Indian Dalit women who are dedicated to the goddess Yellamma and refer to themselves as *devadāsīs*, Lucinda Ramberg (2014) further interrogates understandings of subjectivity and personhood, particularly in relation to broader discourses of *devadāsī* reform. Ramberg focuses on the embodied material practices of *jōgatis*, who, upon their initiation,

become ritual caretakers of the goddess Yellamma (3). In considering the impact of colonial and postcolonial reform on *devadāsī* identity, Ramberg situates *jōgatis*' identities between the dialectic of marriage and prostitution:

Within the symbolic and material economy surrounding Yellamma, devadasis are both *muttaide* (wife) and *randi* (prostitute, widow). Indeed, this double valence is precisely what makes them, and the devi [goddess] they embody, powerful and valuable. As wives of the devi, devadasis can and must transition from *muttaide* to *randi* and back again . . . Devadasis thus incorporate the status between wife and the non-wife, and threaten the distinction between them. (160)

Ramberg notes the complicated effects of state-imposed sanctions on the *devadāsī*'s dual identity. State legislation, such as the Karnataka Devadasis (Prohibition of Dedication) Bill, sought to foreclose the complexity of *devadāsī* identity to simply that of a prostitute (60–61). Ramberg, however, interrogates the assumption that *jōgatis* are exploited and without agency by arguing that through their affiliations with the goddess, *jōgatis* are empowered, on the one hand, to claim material resources of dominant-caste devotees and patrons and, on the other, to draw on their sexuality as a source of income for their families. These forms of material and symbolic capital, or value in Ramberg's words, add complexity to the role of *jōgatis* as women dedicated to the goddess (173). Like the brahmin women of Kuchipudi, *jōgatis* express divergent means of accumulating symbolic capital in their everyday lives.

These scholarly discourses reveal the marginalized position of *devadāsīs* in South India who have been overtly excluded through the effects of colonial and postcolonial reform. The *devadāsī/kalāvāntulu* women described by Soneji (2012) were forced to reside on the margins as their repertoire was rewritten into "classical" Indian dance forms such as Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam. The *jōgatis* featured in Ramberg's (2014) study must contend with the national rescripting of *devadāsī* identity as equivalent to prostitution, even as they navigate alternative religious and kinship networks. As nonbrahmin and marginalized women, *devadāsīs* can never appeal to forms of patriarchy and tradition in the manner of their brahmin counterparts. As a result, *devadāsīs* are doubly effaced, exemplifying Gayatri Spivak's (1988, 83) claim that if "the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."

It is important to underscore that although Kuchipudi brahmin women are proscribed from performance, they still participate in an economy of caste-based authority to which *devadāsī* women do not have access. As upper-caste women from hereditary Kuchipudi families, women such as Rajyalakshmi and Baliakka enjoy a degree of authority not accorded to the *devadāsīs* of contemporary South

India. Evincing this is the fact that women from hereditary Kuchipudi brahmin families often espouse a brahminical and patriarchal worldview that exclusively authorizes their fathers, husbands, and sons in the work of Kuchipudi dance. As cited in the previous chapter, Rajyalakshmi told me that only men from her village should take on the *strī-vēṣam*:

Ever since my childhood, it always used to be the case that men would take on the *strī-vēṣam* to perform. From what I know, it was never the case that women would put on a costume and perform onstage. Nowadays, people are performing their own *pātras* [characters]. Even now, in my village, our men still perform in *strī-vēṣam*. Outsiders also may be performing, but none of us like it. It's only appealing if men from our village take on the role . . . People might ask the question why? Who should perform? Only our people [i.e., people from the Kuchipudi village]. Who should be appreciated? Only our people. Hundreds of people have danced. We villagers may go and watch. But we all think that whoever may be performing, only people from our village who have our blood should dance. No one else has that. That's the mind-set of all our people.

Despite having been beaten and shouted at for her attempts to dance, Rajyalakshmi continues to legitimate her brahmin male counterparts, including her husband and sons, as the rightful bearers of Kuchipudi *sāmpradāyam*, its brahminical tradition of authority. No one else, in Rajyalakshmi's own words, is aesthetically appealing.

The other women from the Kuchipudi village I spoke with also ascribed to a framework that legitimized their fathers, brothers, husbands, and sons in the profession of Kuchipudi dance. For example, most women began their interviews by telling me their family lineage, taking special pride in pointing out the various male dance professionals in their families. Similarly, Baliakka repeatedly deferred (and continues to defer) to her male counterparts, both in her childhood recollections and in her professional career as a Kuchipudi dance teacher. She positions her father and brother as the primary authorities in Kuchipudi dance techniques and presentation and mirrors their aesthetics as closely as possible when training her own students. This deference to her father's authority is evident in her own words:

Even until this day, I'm afraid. Even for doing *naṭṭuvāṅgam*, because holding the cymbals and sitting onstage is my father's place. So that's one fear. My hands begin to sweat. Even now. If I look at the audience, I get nervous, so I don't look.

Playing the *naṭṭuvāṅgam* (cymbals), particularly in the context of Chinna Satyam's style of Kuchipudi, is usually reserved for a guru, often male, who directs a given performance. Baliakka expresses fear at even holding the cymbals and sitting onstage "in her father's place," even after his death. Further evincing this is the

fact that Baliakka never acknowledges herself as a dance guru, a title she reserves solely for her father. As Baliakka's case makes evident, village brahmin women's bodies are not deemed aesthetically suitable mediums for expressing Kuchipudi dance, even as Kuchipudi brahmin men are authorized to don the *strī-vēṣam*. Kuchipudi brahmin women paradoxically reside at the interstice between the normative ideal of the Kuchipudi brahmin man (either performer or guru) and the marginalized figure of the *devadāsī* woman.

The experiences of Kuchipudi brahmin women mirror Narayana Rao's (1991) research of Telugu brahmin women's songs of the *Rāmāyāṇa*. According to Narayana Rao, "These songs are a part of the education Brahmin women receive, a part of brahminic ideology, which constructs women's consciousness in a way suitable to life in a world ultimately controlled by men" (133). By authorizing Kuchipudi brahmin men in the labor of dance performance, the women of hereditary Kuchipudi brahmin families paradoxically uphold normative conceptions of gender and caste that preclude their own participation in the sphere of dance. In the words of Uma Chakravarti (2003), Kuchipudi brahmin women serve as gatekeepers for brahminical patriarchy:

The term 'brahminical patriarchy' is a useful way to isolate this unique structure of patriarchy, by now dominant in many parts of India. It is a set of rules and institutions in which caste and gender are linked, each shaping the other and where women are crucial in maintain the boundaries between castes. (34)

The experiences of women like Rajyalakshmi and Baliakka reflect the intersections of gender and brahminical patriarchy operative in the Kuchipudi village and Kuchipudi dance, more broadly. On the one hand, their upper-caste identities as *brahmin* women position them within a brahminical and patriarchal worldview that authorizes Kuchipudi brahmin performance as "classical," while delimiting *devadāsī* performance and identity as illegitimate. On the other hand, their gender identities as *brahmin women* from the Kuchipudi village place them in the margins of this normative ideal. These shifting negotiations across caste and gender illustrate the importance of a dynamic analysis of power and subordination when examining the intersectionality of caste, gender, and other axes of difference in South Asia (Thomas 2018, 8–9).

Kuchipudi as place also contributes to this narrative of exclusion. Although upper-caste and middle/upper-class female dancing bodies overwhelmingly populate the dance classrooms of urban and transnational forms of Kuchipudi, brahmin women from hereditary village families are prevented entry into this burgeoning sphere of cosmopolitan dance. Even brahmin women who reside in the urban centers of Chennai and Hyderabad, such as Swarajyalakshmi and Baliakka, still ascribe to the village's *sāmpradāyam*. Kuchipudi as *place* thus molds how village brahmin women interact with Kuchipudi as *dance*. These women can never

fulfill the normative ideals they ascribe to, despite their desire to do so: they are neither Kuchipudi brahmin men who uphold a legacy of tradition in the village nor urban middle- or upper-class women who are authorized in the performative practices of “classical” Indian dance. As a result, all Kuchipudi brahmin women appear to metaphorically express *cekka mohālu*—wooden, expressionless, and voiceless faces—that proscribe their entry into performance, even as they function as gatekeepers for a brahminical worldview.

. . .

The landscape of Kuchipudi dance has entirely changed in the decade since I embarked on this project in 2009. In 2012, two years after the completion of the main portion of my fieldwork, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma and Vempati Chinna Satyam passed away. In the years following, other key figures interviewed in this book also passed away, including P.V.G. Krishna Sarma, Vedantam Lakshminarasamma, and Vempati Swarajyalakshmi. In January 2018, Vempati Ravi Shankar, Baliakka’s younger brother, suddenly passed away after a failed kidney transplant.

All these changes in her family have resulted in some unintended consequences: Baliakka is now the apparent heir to her father’s legacy. Aside from her sister-in-law, who is the primary teacher at the KAA, Baliakka is the only living member of her immediate family who teaches in a thriving dance school, and she is increasingly invited to attend functions and events in her father’s memory.¹⁵ Baliakka now has approximately fifty students, including a team of experienced dancers who perform every few weeks at festivals and other celebrations in Hyderabad and nearby urban locales. Notably, Baliakka’s most outstanding student is a nonbrahmin young woman who serves as her right hand in the classroom.

When I returned to Baliakka’s classroom in July 2018, I found it bustling with activity. Baliakka was in the midst of training a male student to perform solo items for an all-male dance festival while also reviewing items with a group of her most experienced female dancers, who were performing at another public festival that weekend. Baliakka suddenly stopped the practice in the middle of an item to shout at a younger dancer in the front row for not executing the three-beat step, *dhi-dhi-tai*. “What are you doing?” she yelled. “You’re skipping a step by not striking *samam* [flat step]. Don’t be lazy. *Dhi-dhi-tai*,” she said sternly. As I watched the dancers practice a variety of items from Chinna Satyam’s repertoire, I was struck by how much Baliakka’s dance classroom resembled the main hall of the KAA in Chennai, with its rows of dancing bodies replicating the neat lines and stylistic bends of Chinna Satyam’s unique Kuchipudi aesthetic. Except this time, Baliakka was not hiding in the back of the dance classroom, avoiding her father’s gaze; instead, she was seated in the most authoritative position, underneath a portrait of her late father, watching keenly for any misstep.

More recently, Mutyam sent me a video recording of Baliakka dancing the Kshetravya *padam*, *Vāḍaligite* (lit., “He’s annoyed!”) at a festival in the city of Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, in January 2019. Choosing not to wear the elaborate costume and makeup of contemporary Kuchipudi dancers, Baliakka was simply adorned in a red silk sari, reminiscent of older recordings of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma enacting Satyabhama.¹⁶ Although she never formally learned the piece from her father, Baliakka danced with ease in this recording, skillfully portraying the angry heroine complaining to her girlfriend about her lover Krishna. When watching the video, I found a remarkable change in the dance teacher who told me five years earlier: “Even if [I] teach with great concentration and confidence, [I] feel very shy to dance, [I] feel embarrassed ... I have stage fear even to do those small roles. I’m very scared to get onstage.” Once reluctant to dance in front of her students in the confines of her classroom, today Baliakka performs in public to enact the very movements that have inhabited her body for decades.

Baliakka, the Ekalavya of Kuchipudi dance, has a remarkable story of hardship, longing, and ultimately triumph. As a Kuchipudi brahmin woman, she was forbidden from learning dance by her father, a world-renowned Kuchipudi guru who taught hundreds of women to dance, except Baliakka and her sisters. Nevertheless, she persevered and, through a series of unforeseen circumstances, the future of her father’s legacy now rests on the shoulders of Baliakka, a Kuchipudi brahmin woman who, until very recently, has been proscribed from dance. And although she still turns to her father for legitimacy (as evinced by the numerous photographs of her father in her dance classroom), Baliakka is now the repository for Kuchipudi dance knowledge. While it is true that Baliakka has relied on her father and her younger brother to legitimize her role as a dance teacher, the landscape has shifted dramatically over the course of the last decade. Today, Baliakka is finally able to embody an authoritative position as a Kuchipudi guru, occupying the seat once reserved for village brahmin men like her father.

Baliakka’s case illustrates not only the reshaping of her father’s legacy, but also the contingency of hegemonic brahmin masculinity. As a result of the changes implemented by Chinna Satyam’s KAA, men and women from a variety of caste backgrounds and nationalities can learn Kuchipudi dance. In the village, the brahmin man occupies the center of his performative and domestic world; but in the urban and transnational context, the brahmin male body is increasingly obsolete, particularly as an array of dancers, including hereditary brahmin women like Baliakka, begin to dance. The expansion of Kuchipudi from a village dance form to a transnational “classical” tradition not only expands the boundaries of Kuchipudi dance beyond the village, but also forecloses the possibility for achieving hegemonic brahmin masculinity through impersonation. To paraphrase the words of one interlocutor, there is no need for men to dance as women when women, even village brahmin women, are dancing themselves.

The expansion of Kuchipudi from village to urban/transnational dance form has, in a somewhat circuitous fashion, enabled Baliakka to become a Kuchipudi guru in her own right. In continuing to assert her right to dance, Baliakka is casting aside her *cekka-moham*, her supposed wooden face, to become the bearer of Kuchipudi *sāmpradāyam*. Baliakka is now the embodiment of her father's legacy, a position that I certainly did not anticipate her to inhabit when I met her for the first time nearly a decade ago. By decentering the brahmin male body in *vēṣam* and privileging the "hidden transcript" of women's speech (Gold and Raheja 1994, 26), this chapter positions Baliakka as the unexpected heroine of Kuchipudi dance history.