Taking Center Stage

*The Poet-Saint and the Impersonator of
Kuchipudi Dance History*

Impersonation in Kuchipudi dance is grounded in a moment of divine inspiration. According to popular hagiography, the founding saint of Kuchipudi dance, Siddhendra, had a revelatory vision of Krishna and his consort Satyabhama, after which he abandoned all worldly ties and dedicated his life to singing the praises of his god. Envisioning himself as Satyabhama, Siddhendra composed *Bhāmākalāpam* (lit., "the lyrical drama of Bhama"), which features Satyabhama's love and separation from Krishna. Siddhendra taught this dance drama to all the brahmin boys of the village Kuchelapuram (now Kuchipudi), prescribing that they continue to don Satyabhama's *vēṣam* for generations to come.

This popular narrative is often cited as the critical starting point of Kuchipudi dance history, whether in dance classrooms in India or the United States. Although practitioners and scholars disagree about the exact period of Siddhendra's lifetime, assigning him dates that span from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the existence and the influence of Siddhendra on Kuchipudi dance is accepted as unequivocal fact.[1] The common belief in the hagiography of Siddhendra, however, must be framed against the backdrop of broader colonial and postcolonial interventions that gave rise to Kuchipudi as "classical" dance. Elite Telugu proponents in the mid-twentieth century significantly expanded the life story of Siddhendra into a devotional hagiography of religious significance. By imagining Siddhendra as the ultimate male devotee who speaks through the female voice of Satyabhama pining for her god/husband Krishna, Telugu elite and later Kuchipudi dancers locate the life story of Siddhendra within the broader framework of vernacular *bhakti* traditions. Through these mid-twentieth-century innovations and expansions, Siddhendra transforms from the reported author of *Bhāmākalāpam* into a paradigmatic *bhakti* poet-saint and, arguably, the first Kuchipudi impersonator.

Alongside this discursive rewriting is the performative ecology of colonial and postcolonial South India. Although borrowing from the *devadāsī* repertoire, Kuchipudi—an ostensibly brahminical, male-only dance form from a single village—skirted the anti-nautch sentiments that plagued the development of Bharatanatyam, the major "classical" dance form of South India, in the early twentieth century. Additionally, a national fascination with sartorial guising in Indian theatre propelled the hereditary brahmin impersonator to a position of prominence on the Kuchipudi stage.[2] By virtue of his caste status and gender identity, the brahmin impersonator from the Kuchipudi village became the face of Kuchipudi classical dance in postcolonial South India. In what follows, I examine the significance of impersonation in Kuchipudi dance history, as both vocal guising in narrative and sartorial guising in performance, to trace the constructed genealogy of Kuchipudi dance and foreground the mechanisms by which the poet-saint Siddhendra and the brahmin impersonator came to occupy center stage.

THE DANCING MALE BODY

By focusing on the figure of the Kuchipudi brahmin impersonator, this chapter contributes to the field of Indian dance historiography that often overlooks the critical role that the dancing male body, particularly the dancing brahmin male body, played in shaping South Indian dance as classical. While men are certainly present in histories of South Indian dance, particularly as dance masters (*naṭṭuvaṉār*s) and relatives of hereditary female performers (Srinivasan 1985; Soneji 2012), men who dance are often missing from these broader discussions. The most sustained discussion of South Indian male dancers appears in Hari Krishnan's essay, "From Gynemimesis to Hypermasculinity" (2009), which discusses Muvvanallur Sabhapatayya, Chinnaiya, and Krishnasvami Ravu Jadav, three male dancers who performed in the nineteenth-century Tanjavur court. Among these male dancers, Sabhapatayya is said to have performed in the guise of a *devadāsī* before King Serfoji II, who ruled Tanjavur from 1798–1833 (Krishnan 2009, 380). Chinnaiya (1802–1856), the eldest brother of the famous Tanjavur Quartet, is also said to have given performances in a woman's guise in Tanjavur and Mysore (381–82).[3]

Mirroring the trends observed by Kathryn Hansen (2002) in the context of Parsi theatre in western India, impersonation, a practice Krishnan (2009, 383) refers to as gynemimesis, existed alongside the presence of female dancers in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South India.[4] This trend is also attested to by Muthukumar Pillai, an early twentieth-century male dance master who performed in *strī-vēṣam* as early as 1888 (Meduri 1996, 43). Even E. Krishna Iyer, Tamil brahmin lawyer and one of the founders of the famous Madras Music Academy (est. 1928), is known to have performed in *vēṣam* from 1923–29 (Krishnan 2009, 378).[5]

However, the male dancing body in *strī-vēṣam* soon became displaced in the newly revived dance form of Bharatanatyam. According to Krishnan:

> The emergence of the new nationalized form of dance called bharata natyam in the 1930s reflected not only a concern for sexual and aesthetic propriety on the part of its upper-class women performers . . . but also a parallel concern for the nurturing of a new masculine identity for its male performers. This new masculinity, a reaction to colonial constructions of South Asian men as "effeminate" (Sinha 1995), was also affected by Gandhian nationalism that was rooted in the ideas of self-control, discipline, and sexual abstinence . . . This new, state-endorsed invention of the male performer of dance could not accommodate the slippery representations of gynemimetic performance. (384)

In place of impersonation, the athletic and bold movements of Kathakali dance were adapted for the Bharatanatyam male dancer, particularly in Rukmini Arundale's dance school Kalakshetra (est. 1936) (Krishnan 2009, 284). Kathakali, similar in many ways to Kuchipudi, is an exclusively male dance form from the South Indian state of Kerala that combines dramatic enactments and elaborate guises of both male and female characters (Zarrilli 2000). In the mid-twentieth century, male Bharatanatyam dancers began to increasingly rely on "the histrionics of kathakali, which involved bold, strong, almost athletic movements of the face, torso, arms, and lower limbs" (Krishnan 2009, 384–85). Thus, male Bharatanatyam dancers enacted a "new Indian masculinity" that reinterpreted the athletic repertoire of Kathakali within the framework of the newly invented dance form of Bharatanatyam.

In chapter 3 of *Unfinished Gestures,* Davesh Soneji (2012) also examines the role of men in the trajectory of South Indian dance, particularly focusing on legal debates surrounding *devadāsī* performance. Male relatives of hereditary female performers promulgated the creation of new caste identities—*icai vēḷālar* in Tamil-speaking regions and *sūryabaḷija* in Telugu-speaking regions—in reaction to the growing stigmatization of *devadāsī* identities (114–15). New nonbrahmin caste associations headed by men supported the anti-nautch movement and sought to outlaw professional dancing by women in their communities, while positioning these men as "authentic" dance masters and artists (115, 143). Like the debates on *satī* (Mani 1998), the debates about *devadāsī* identity remained within the purview of male actors: "The key promise of *devadāsī* reform for women—namely, 'respectable' citizenship in the emergent nation—was never actualized, primarily because ultimately the movement itself was monopolized by men, and it was transformed into a project for men" (Soneji 2012, 115).[6] Adding further complexity to this picture is the relationship between brahmin male patrons and hereditary female performers (129, 267n11).[7] The sustained relationships between *devadāsī*s and their brahmin male patrons resulted in some brahmin men, like S. Satyamurti (1887–1943), taking a stance against the anti-nautch movement (130). Soneji's archival and ethnographic research points to the complicated relationships between *devadāsī* performers, their male relatives, and their brahmin male patrons.

Integral to the landscape of *devadāsī* reform and the classicization of Indian dance was the growing repertoire of "Oriental" dance, which opened up space for

the male dancing body in transnational performance. Along with well-known female dancers Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova, male dancers Ted Shawn (1891–1972), Uday Shankar (1900–1977), and Ram Gopal (1912–2003) are particularly prominent in scholarly discourses on both Indian and American dance (Erdman 1987; Coorlawala 1992; Allen 1997; Srinivasan 2012; Sinha 2017). For example, Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova teamed up with novice Indian dancer Uday Shankar to perform two ballets with Indian themes—*A Hindu Wedding* (a piece for twenty-two dancers) and *Radha-Krishna* (featuring Pavlova and Shankar as Radha and Krishna, respectively)—that toured the United States in 1923–24 (Erdman 1987, 72–73; Allen 1997, 93). Shankar, who at the time was not formally trained in Indian dance, soon made it his mission to present Indian dance to Western audiences. Notably, Shankar's brown body gave him the legitimacy to perform his vision of Indian "authenticity," even as he lacked a nuanced knowledge of Indian dance. As Joan Erdman (1987, 73) notes: "Being born and raised in India gave [Shankar] a natural genuineness, but he still lacked a 'text' to translate." Shankar's ability to translate across contexts developed after his early performances with Pavlova, and by the end of his career he was heralded as India's first modern dance choreographer (79).[8]

Ted Shawn and Ram Gopal have equally transnational pasts that blend Hindu religious imagery with an Orientalist aesthetic (Gopal 1957; Allen 1997; Sinha 2017). In the case of the former, Ted Shawn partnered with Ruth St. Denis in 1915 to form the Denishawn company (Desmond 1991, 30; Srinivasan 2012, 99).[9] Denishawn's early choreography included *Nautch* (1919) and *Dance of the Black and Gold Sari* (1923), pieces performed by St. Denis, Shawn, and eight other dancers throughout various regions of Asia in 1925–26 (Coorlawala 1992, 123; Allen 1997, 88). During the segment of the Asia tour in India (January–May 1926), Shawn developed a solo piece, *Cosmic Dance of Siva,* inspired by Ananda K. Coomaraswamy's (1918) influential essay "The Dance of Shiva" (Allen 1997, 90).[10] *Cosmic Dance of Siva* debuted at the Grand Opera House in Manila in 1926 after the India tour and featured Shawn himself as the embodiment of Nataraja, the lord of dance:

> As the Hindu sculpture of Nataraja or the dancing Siva, [Shawn] wore only body paint, brief trunks, and a towering crown and stood on a pedestal within a huge upright metal ring that haloed his entire body . . . The dynamics of the solo ranged from still balances on half-toe to violent twists of the torso and furious stamping of the feet, all confined within the hoop that represented the container of the universe. (Shelton 1981, 213, as cited by Allen 1997, 91)

Given that much of American modern dance traces its roots to St. Denis and Shawn, the appropriation of Hindu iconography for the purposes of Shawn's syncretic dance piece is not inconsequential. Just as Nataraja was revived to become the patron saint of Indian dance (Allen 1997, 83–85), Indian dance itself was

repurposed to become the foundations of modern American dance, as evident in Shawn's choreography. A similar synthesis of Orientalist taste and Indian iconography may be seen in the arresting photographs of Ram Gopal by American photographer Carl Van Vechten in his New York apartment-turned-studio in 1938 (Sinha 2017).[11] Collectively, male dancers such as Ted Shawn, Uday Shankar, and Ram Gopal underscore Sitara Thobani's (2017, 37) suggestion that Indian dance was produced in the "contact zone" instantiated by British colonialism, Indian nationalism, and Euro-American Orientalism. Simply put, "this dance has always been performed on Empire's stage" (26).

Beyond these singular male figures, however, the discussion of the dancing male body is more limited in scholarship on Indian dance. In *Kathakali Dance-Drama,* Phillip Zarrilli (2000) provides a robust analysis of the embodied techniques of male Kathakali dancers. Margaret Walker's (2016) discussion of the history of Kathak analyzes the role of hereditary Kathak male dance gurus, particularly the well-known Birju Maharaj. In the context of Malaysia, Premalatha Thiagarajan (2017) examines male dancers in Odissi and Bharatanatyam, particularly the Muslim-Malay male dancer Ramli Ibrahim.[12]

However, no scholarship to date seriously considers the role of the dancing male body in the twentieth-century "revival" of classical Indian dance. Instead of envisioning male dance through the lens of exceptional figures of the nineteenth-century Tanjavur court, the colonial revival, or the twentieth-century transnational dance scene, this chapter posits the brahmin male community of dancers from the Kuchipudi village as integral to the classicization of South Indian dance. By virtue of their gender and caste status, the village's hereditary brahmin male community was able to sidestep the anti-nautch politics of colonial India and emerge as the symbol of the Telugu arts scene. Impersonation, in this case the brahmin male body donning a woman's guise, became the central script for fashioning Kuchipudi into a nationally recognized "classical" Indian dance form.

SIDDHENDRA:
THE FIRST KUCHIPUDI IMPERSONATOR

While Kuchipudi practitioners may point to Sanskrit textual sources, namely Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra,* as the foundations of Kuchipudi dance, the history of the dance is a narrative that typically begins with Siddhendra. As the reported author of *Bhāmākalāpam,* the earliest recorded dance drama of the Kuchipudi repertoire, Siddhendra is thought to have both established and propagated Kuchipudi as a dance form. While Kuchipudi dancers may accept Siddhendra's life story as undeniable fact, the lack of substantive historical evidence has caused scholars to question the historicity of *Bhāmākalāpam*'s ostensible author (Arudra 1994; Jonnalagadda 1996b).[13]

In palm-leaf manuscripts from the Tirupati Oriental Research Institute and the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library in Chennai, Siddhendra is unceremoniously mentioned as the composer of the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama, often in a single sentence.[14] For example, in the palm-leaf *Bhāmākalāpam* R. 429 from the Tirupati Oriental Research Institute, dating to approximately the late nineteenth century, there is a single mention of a figure known as Siddhendra: "This is Siddhendra Yogi's composition" (*Bhāmākalāpam* R. 429, palm-leaf 11b).[15] No additional reference is made to Siddhendra's family background, patronage, or training, all of which constitute pertinent information the Telugu poet usually includes in the colophon of his or her poetic text.[16]

Adding to this complexity is the fact that the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama is not solely under the purview of the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village. As several scholars have noted, *Bhāmākalāpam* (also known by other names, including *Pārijātanāṭaka, Navajanārdana Pārijātam,* and *Bhāmāveṣakatha*) is a dance drama that was performed by a wide array of caste communities in Telugu South India from the eighteenth century onwards (Jonnalagadda 1996a; Soneji 2012; Putcha 2015). The brahmins of the Kuchipudi village, the female *kalāvantulu* (courtesans) of the east and west Godavari districts, and the male Turpu Bhagavatam practitioners from the goldsmith communities in eastern Andhra all performed and continue to perform *Bhāmākalāpam* under various titles (Ramakrishna 1984; Jonnalagadda 1996a, 1996b; Nagabhushana Sarma 1996; Soneji 2012; Putcha 2015).[17] Furthermore, many palm-leaf manuscripts housed in public library archives, including *Bhāmākalāpamu* R. 429, likely belonged to Telugu courtesan communities rather than to the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village.[18] The fact that *Bhāmākalāpam* belongs to the repertoires of multiple Telugu performance communities raises critical questions regarding the historicity of *Bhāmākalāpam*'s reported author.[19] It is not my intention to reconcile the debate regarding Siddhendra's existence, a task that appears to be historically difficult if not impossible. While it may not be possible to determine who exactly Siddhendra *was* in the premodern period, we can ascertain who he *became* in the course of the twentieth century: the paradigmatic *bhakti* poet-saint of Kuchipudi dance. As I will now argue, Siddhendra's hagiography, told in varying iterations by scholars and practitioners of Kuchipudi dance, appears to be a mid-twentieth-century act of innovation and expansion.

In postcolonial Andhra Pradesh, we find a remarkable expansion of Siddhendra's identity beyond the simple reference found in *Bhāmākalāpam* palm-leaves to a lengthy hagiography of divine import. Drawing on printed accounts that first emerged in the mid-twentieth century, Siddhendra's hagiography can be summarized as follows:

> There was once a young orphaned brahmin boy named Siddhappa, who used to travel from village to village living off the charity of others. Fond of music and drama,

he used to watch performances whenever he could. After all-night performances, he would spend the night at the *maṭha* [religious institution] established by Narahari Tirtha in Srikakulam.[20] The head of the *maṭha* took kindly to the boy and sent him to Udupi for Vedic study.

Siddhappa returned to Srikakulam as an erudite scholar versed in Vedic and Śāstric texts, including the *Nāṭyaśāstra,* and was renamed with the honorific title Siddhendra. Upon his return, the elders of the village encouraged Siddhendra to fulfill the marriage vows that he had made to a girl living on the opposite banks of the Krishna River.[21] As Siddhendra set out across the river to meet his new bride, he was caught midstream in a torrential storm. Siddhendra prayed to Krishna, promising that he would renounce worldly ties if he safely arrived on the opposite banks of the river.

Siddhendra survived as a result of his prayers to Krishna and successfully arrived on the other side of the river, where his in-laws were waiting. When his new bride lifted her eyes to see Siddhendra for the first time, she screamed "*Sannyāsi!* [Renunciant!]" and fell faint. Siddhendra then had a divine vision of Krishna with his consort Satyabhama and realized that his future could only be one of devotion. He envisioned himself as Satyabhama, the devotee and beloved of Krishna. Soon, his songs, which featured Satyabhama's love and separation from Krishna, came to be known as *Bhāmākalāpam.*

He traveled to the nearby town of Kuchelapuram and taught his dance drama to a group of talented young brahmin boys. Siddhendra then took a vow from all the boys of Kuchelapuram that they would continue to enact *Bhāmākalāpam* at least once every year. They assured him that they would continue to enact the dance drama for generations to come. Thus, it is until this day that *Bhāmākalāpam* continues to survive in the village of Kuchelapuram, now known as Kuchipudi.[22]

The life story of Siddhendra is unremarkable when examined in the broader context of vernacular *bhakti* (devotional) traditions in which the employment of vocal guising is a common literary trope (Ramanujan 1989b; Narayanan 2003; Pechilis 2012; Clooney 2014).[23] Here, I define *vocal guising* as a literary convention in which the poet, either male or female, impersonates the voice of a lovesick female heroine. Karen Pechilis (2012, 796) identifies a diverse list of *bhakti* poets, spanning from male poet-saints such as Manikkavacakar and Nammalvar (both Tamil saints from ca. ninth century) to female poet-saints such as Andal (Tamil Alvar saint ca. ninth century) and Mirabai (Hindi saint ca. sixteenth century), who use the image of the lovesick heroine to speak to god.[24]

When discussing North Indian Vaishnava (Vishnu-centered) poets from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, John Stratton Hawley (2000, 240) writes:

> When they speak of lovesickness, they project themselves almost exclusively into the voice of one of the women who wait for Krishna—before lovemaking or, even more likely, afterward . . . Whether one conceives of it in the secular or religious sense (and because these are not entirely separable), longing has a definite gender: it is feminine.

Siddhendra's hagiography, which collapses the identity of Siddhendra with Satyabhama, builds on the long-standing trope of vocal guising conventional to vernacular *bhakti* traditions. Disavowing corporeal human love, Siddhendra, like the long line of male *bhakti* saints before him, envisions himself as Satyabhama, the devotee and beloved of Krishna, and pens *Bhāmākalāpam* as an allegorical drama of love and separation from his god.

These allegorical iterations of Siddhendra's hagiography are historically questionable. While it is possible that versions of Siddhendra's life story circulated as part of the oral tradition among the brahmins of Kuchipudi, perhaps even as early as the eighteenth or nineteenth century, there is little textual evidence to support the presence of these earlier oral narratives (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 45). Siddhendra's hagiography, at least the devotional version presented above, was only popularized in the mid-twentieth century by Telugu elite through speeches, printed articles, and books. As an example, we can turn to Vissa Appa Rao's (1958) address at the Dance Seminar in Delhi in 1958 that, as discussed in the introduction, was a critical turning point for the classicization of Kuchipudi. The speech, titled "Kuchipudi School of Dance," was given before an elite audience of scholars and dancers, including noted Sanskritist V. Raghavan and Bharatanatyam proponent Rukmini Arundale, the latter of whom infamously contested Kuchipudi's purported classical status (Putcha 2015). Leaving the ensuing classicism controversy aside, it is noteworthy that in his speech, Appa Rao (1958) positions Siddhendra in a long line of Vaishnava (and mostly North Indian) *bhakti* saints including Jayadeva, Chaitanya, Mirabai, Kabir, and Tulsidas, clearly invoking the imagery of a unified "*bhakti* movement" coalescing in North India in the early modern period (Hawley 2015). Appa Rao (1958, 8) also points to *bhakti* concepts, namely *jīvātma/paramātma* (individual soul / divine soul) and *madhura-bhakti* (devotion of love), and Sanskrit aesthetic imagery to frame Siddhendra's life story. In the first-ever national address given about Kuchipudi dance, Appa Rao, himself a Niyogi brahmin and Telugu scholar, unequivocally paints Siddhendra as a paradigmatic *bhakti* poet-saint.[25]

The *bhakti*-cization of Siddhendra's life story is further apparent in the writings of Telugu brahmin and Kuchipudi proponent Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao. In an English article, Kanakalingeshwara Rao (1966) provides an elaborate hagiography of the orphaned boy Siddhappa who had a divine vision of Krishna at a young age, traveled to Udupi to learn the *śāstra*s, and ultimately penned *Bhāmākalāpam* to express his *madhura-bhakti* (devotion of love) to Krishna through the voice of Satyabhama. Kanakalingeshwara Rao (1966, 33) carefully justifies Siddhendra's choice to promote Kuchipudi dance among the brahmin community:

> The Devadasis of the village requested Siddhendra to teach them *Bhama Kalapam*. The songs of *Bhama Kalapam* were already of sensuous love. The Devadasi were already adept in such gestures. Siddhendra thought that they would still more demoralize society if they presented Bhama Kalapam dances. So he induced good-looking

young Brahmin boys to learn *Bhama Kalapam.* Till then the Brahmins had never
danced, though they were Gurus.

Kanakalingeshwara Rao's overtly apologist tone is clearly implicated in the
broader anti-nautch discourses of colonial and postcolonial India. Likely wor-
ried that brahminical Kuchipudi dance could be subject to the same critiques as
devadāsī performance, Kanakalingeshwara Rao weaves together what poet-scholar
Arudra (1994, 29) later dismisses as an "unauthenticated account" of Siddhendra,
who selectively chooses to teach brahmins over *devadāsī*s. The Siddhendra of
Kanakalingeshwara Rao's essay is portrayed as both an erudite brahmin scholar
learned in the Sanskrit *śāstra*s and the arts, as well as the ideal *bhakti* saint who
expresses ultimate devotion to Krishna. This reformulation of Siddhendra as brah-
min scholar–cum–*bhakti* saint works to ground Kuchipudi dance in both Sanskrit
textual tradition and Vaishnava devotional discourse. The availability in print of
Kanakalingeshwara Rao's writings, which are cited extensively in the publications
of Kuchipudi dancer-scholars (Rama Rao 1992; Acharya and Sarabhai 1992; Usha
Gayatri 2016), popularized his version of Siddhendra's story. Kanakalingeshwara
Rao's extensive efforts in promoting Kuchipudi dance, as previously discussed in
the introduction, also established him as an important authority on Kuchipudi
and its founding saint. Also dovetailing with these mid-twentieth-century writ-
ings, printed texts within the past few decades replicate the *bhakti* sentiments of
Siddhendra's hagiography, further positioning him as an erudite brahmin scholar
turned *bhakti* poet-saint.[26]

The aforementioned narratives of Siddhendra's hagiography are not grounded
in historical fact or archival evidence, nor are they even mentioned in early palm-
leaf texts of *Bhāmākalāpam.* Rather, I suggest they are mid-twentieth-century acts
of innovation and expansion by Telugu elite scholars and dancers that function
to legitimize the history of Kuchipudi through the religious discourse of *bhakti*.[27]
Perhaps the clearest admission of narrative invention appears in a booklet by
M.A. Naidu, published in 1975 on the occasion of the World Telugu Conference.
In this booklet, *Kuchipudi Classical Dance,* Naidu (1975, 8) begins a discussion of
Siddhendra's life story by acknowledging the historical uncertainty of the account:

> There is a very interesting incident about how 'Siddhayya', or Siddhappa became Sid-
> dhendra Yogi. *There is no recorded evidence about this incident. So, I am narrating the
> incident as I comprehend it to be reasonable.* [Emphasis added]

Naidu then outlines the portion of the narrative which recounts that Siddhendra,
on his return to Kuchipudi, became stranded in the middle of the Krishna River
and prayed to his lord Krishna to save him. After being saved from drowning,
Siddhendra renounced earthly ties and "diverted all the amorousness in him into
creating 'Bhamakalapam'" (Naidu 1975, 9). Naidu's straightforward admission that,

despite the lack of recorded evidence, he is narrating the incident of Siddhendra's life as *he comprehends it to be reasonable* provides insight into the background of most hagiographies of Siddhendra. According to Arudra (1994), Siddhendra's biographical details are mired in "lingering questions and some fashionable fallacies," giving pause for concern when examining the hagiography of Kuchipudi's founding saint.[28]

Despite historical uncertainty, Siddhendra's life story is now ubiquitously accepted throughout Kuchipudi circles in India and abroad. During the course of my fieldwork in the Kuchipudi village, my brahmin interlocutors invariably invoked *bhakti* imagery, namely the image of the *jīvātma* (individual soul) in search of the *paramātma* (divine soul), when discussing Siddhendra's life story. For example, village resident and hereditary brahmin Pasumarti Keshav Prasad, observed the following about Siddhendra's heroine Satyabhama: "For that kind of woman, in order to reduce her pride, the *jīvātma* [individual soul] and the *paramātma* [divine soul] have to combine. The *jīvātma* has to go into the *paramātma*. The *paramātma* is Krishna. [Satyabhama] has to be absorbed into Krishna." Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, a younger brahmin dancer from the Kuchipudi village, mapped the story of Siddhendra onto that of Satyabhama:

> The whole story of *Bhāmākalāpam* is Siddhendra Yogi's creation. Siddhendra has taken the beauty of the character and molded his own life experiences of *viraham* [separation] onto Satyabhama . . . Siddhendra's life story is that he got separated from his wife at sixteen years old. The major concept is how to unite *jīvātma* with *paramātma*. That *jīvātma* is the soul within the human . . . Krishna is *paramātma*.

In addition to these observations, many other brahmin men from the Kuchipudi village invoked the figure of Siddhendra and the imagery of the *jīvātma* (individual soul) and the *paramātma* (divine soul) when describing Satyabhama and Krishna, respectively.[29] The invocation of *jīvātma*/*paramātma* terminology is commonplace in published texts on Kuchipudi history by dancers and scholars alike.[30]

The broadly resonant themes of vernacular *bhakti,* particularly the invocation of *jīvātma*/*paramātma* terminology, enabled the expansion and popularization of Siddhendra's hagiography in the mid-twentieth century. By employing a version of the modernist, pan-Indian discourse of *bhakti* (Hawley 2015), Kuchipudi scholars and dancers envision Siddhendra as the ideal *bhakti* poet-saint whose longing for his god materializes in his poetic production. For Kuchipudi dancers and scholars alike, Siddhendra is the male devotee (*jīvātma*) who speaks through the voice of the female character Satyabhama, who is pining for her god/husband Krishna (*paramātma*). The implication of Siddhendra's gender identification with Satyabhama not only influences the reception of his hagiography but also sets the stage for the practice of impersonation through the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama. If we read the practice of impersonation capaciously, vocal guising can also be envisioned as an act of impersonation. As a male poet impersonating a female

voice, Siddhendra is not only the paradigmatic *bhakti* saint, but also arguably the first impersonator of Kuchipudi dance history.

SIDDHENDRA AND KSHETRAYYA: HAGIOGRAPHIES FROM KRISHNA DISTRICT

Siddhendra's hagiography, one of a local villager–turned–*bhakti* saint, bears a striking resemblance to the mid-twentieth-century hagiographies of Kshetrayya, the seventeenth-century Telugu composer whose *padam*s (short lyrical compositions) were and continue to be performed by *devadāsī* communities across South India (Ramanujan, Narayana Rao, and Shulman 1994; Soneji 2012).[31] While historical documentation remains unclear, Kshetrayya is said to have been born in the village of Muvva in Krishna district, located less than three miles from the Kuchipudi village. In an edited volume of Kshetrayya's *padam*s printed in 1963, Appa Rao, the scholar who also spoke at the aforementioned Delhi seminar in 1958, describes Kshetrayya as an illiterate cowherd from Muvva who, like Siddhendra, has a divine vision of Krishna and decides to abandon all worldly ties.[32] In his preface to *Kṣētrayya padamulu*, Appa Rao (1963, 11–12) suggests that Kshetrayya even traveled to the neighboring village of Kuchipudi and learned music, dance, and Indian aesthetic theory from the community of brahmin male performers residing there. Appa Rao is careful to note that Kshetrayya is likely to have had association with *devadāsī* women who were affiliated with the Muvva temple and learned music and dance from the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village (11–12). Other Kuchipudi scholars forge connections between Siddhendra and Kshetrayya, usually citing the proximity of Kuchipudi and Muvva as an indication of the thriving "cultural heritage" of Andhra Pradesh state (Kanakalingeshwara Rao 1966, 30).[33]

The emergence of two regionally proximate hagiographies—Siddhendra from Kuchipudi and Kshetrayya from Muvva—in mid-twentieth-century writings of elite proponents of Telugu language and arts such as Appa Rao, Kanakalingeshwara Rao, and others is no coincidence. In fact, Siddhendra and Kshetrayya are often cited together by scholars who explicitly point to the proximity of Kuchipudi and Muvva, as if the presence of one *bhakti* poet-saint in the region justifies the existence of a second (Appa Rao 1963, 11–12; Vatsyayan [1974] 2007, 57). In her study of Telugu language politics in colonial and postcolonial South India, Lisa Mitchell (2009) notes the increased attention given to the lives (*caritramu*) of Telugu poets in the writings of Telugu language proponents such as Gurajada Sriramamurti (1878) and Kandukuri Viresalingam (1887). As Mitchell (2009, 86) suggests, "Texts like Sriramamurti's *Kavi Jīvitamulu* and Viresalingam's *Āndhra Kavula Caritramu* shift the emphasis from poets as authors to poets as central characters in novelized renditions of their own lives." A parallel shift from poets as authors to poets as the central characters in their own hagiographies occurs in the case of Siddhendra in the mid-twentieth century (Mitchell 2009, 86).[34] Within a few years of the

creation of Andhra Pradesh state, Telugu elites and others working to promote the Telugu arts contributed to a printed corpus of hagiographies of Siddhendra and Kshetrayya, in both Telugu and English, available to wider audiences.

The devotionalization of Telugu poets Siddhendra and Kshetrayya into *bhakti* saints was quickly replicated in later print sources, film, and visual imagery, as evidenced by the recently commissioned images of Siddhendra at Tank Bund in Hyderabad.[35] In the Kuchipudi village, there is a temple in honor of Siddhendra at the center of the *agrahāram* that employs a full-time priest to attend to a black granite *mūrti* (image) of the Kuchipudi founding saint (see Figure 4). Festivals in honor of Siddhendra are held annually on the outdoor performance venue located adjacent to the Siddhendra temple.[36] These performative and artistic representations, coupled with his devotionalized hagiography, articulate Siddhendra's "visual theology" as one of great saintly devotion (Eck 1998, 41).

What prompted this mid-twentieth-century transformation of Siddhendra from reported author to paradigmatic *bhakti* poet-saint? I argue that the broader transformations of Kuchipudi into a classical dance form in postcolonial South India necessitated an elevation and subsequent rewriting of Siddhendra's life story into devotional hagiography. By casting Siddhendra as the ultimate devotee of Krishna, Kuchipudi practitioners and elite brahmin patrons, including Vissa Appa Rao, Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao, and others, worked to endow Siddhendra and his life story with the religious weight befitting the founding saint of a classical dance tradition.

It is notable that Appa Rao and Kanakalingeshwara Rao—both Smarta brahmin men—promulgated the *bhakti* hagiographies of Siddhendra and Kshetrayya. The convergence of Smarta brahmins and *bhakti* is not solely a Telugu phenomenon. In the Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel Memorial Lectures in New Delhi in 1964, noted Sanskritist and Tamil Smarta brahmin V. Raghavan painted a sweeping picture of the *bhakti* movement as the offspring of a great integration of poet-saints from southern to northern India (Hawley 2015, 20).[37] Raghavan's characterization of a pan-Indian *bhakti* movement shaped not only Indian cultural sensibility, but also scholarly production, including the writings of Western anthropologist Milton Singer (1972) (Hancock 1999, 64–67; Hawley 2015, 25). When discussing the relationship between Singer and Raghavan, Mary Hancock (1999) clearly outlines the impact of Smarta brahmin intervention: "By contextualizing [Singer's] work . . . it is possible to see strategies by which Smārtas developed a discourse on national culture that has been influential in Indian cultural politics and in the production of scholarly knowledge about South Asia" (67). According to Hancock, urban elite cultural production in South India is a Smarta brahmin endeavor (64).

The role of the brahmin in Tamil-speaking South India must be situated against the backdrop of colonial and postcolonial language politics of what is referred to as *tamilpparru,* or Tamil devotion (Ramaswamy 1997, 194). Within this context, the Tamil brahmins of the late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-centuries were

FIGURE 4. Siddhendra's *mūrti* (image) in a temple in the Kuchipudi village. Photo by author.

considered traitors of Tamil by their adherence to Sanskritic culture. Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) writes:

> A question that was repeatedly raised in the discourses of many of Tamil's devotees from the turn of the century is "Are Brahmans Tamilian?" The answer, increasingly,

was an emphatic "No." Brahmans are exclusionist and caste conscious; they identify themselves with the North, with Aryan culture, and with Sanskrit. Above all, and most sacrilegiously from the radical enthusiast's point of view, they disparage Tamil, treating its high literature and culture as derivative of Sanskrit. (194–95)

Situated within the broader matrix of anti-brahminical neo-Shaivism and Dravidianism, which crystallized in the early to mid-twentieth century, the Tamil brahmin was explicitly disavowed (140). Tamil brahmins during this period were viewed as incapable of Tamil devotion, *tamilpparru,* in the mode of their nonbrahmin counterparts (194).

For centuries, South India has been characterized by polyglossia and therefore it is difficult to delineate the boundaries of what constitutes Tamil- and Telugu-speaking areas (Narayana Rao 2003; Peterson 2011). Nevertheless, I would argue that the Telugu version of *tamilpparru* is not characterized by anti-brahminical sentiment in the same manner of both neo-Shaiva and the Dravidian movements of the colonial and postcolonial periods of Tamil-speaking South India. In the context of the arts, Smarta brahmins served as the architects of Telugu cultural production. For Kuchipudi, Smarta brahmins Appa Rao and Kanakalingeshwara Rao promulgated Siddhendra's hagiography, which prompted the canonization of Siddhendra as an ideal *bhakti* poet-saint. The commonplace *bhakti* trope of vocal guising and the invocation of *jīvātma/paramātma* further enabled the "mythopoetics" of Siddhendra and his life story (Putcha 2015, 3). The visual imagery of Siddhendra's saintly persona in the village temple, coupled with popular artistic renderings, also extended the devotional aura of Kuchipudi's founding saint. Like the *bhakti* saints before him, Siddhendra transformed from the attributed author of *Bhāmākalāpam* to the founding saint of a nationally recognized Indian classical dance form. The classicization of Kuchipudi thus rests on the *bhakti*-cization of Siddhendra by Smarta brahmin men, as mid-twentieth-century innovations paradoxically enabled the creation of classical tradition. The story of Siddhendra and his *Bhāmākalāpam,* promulgated by Smarta brahmins, became the imagined genealogical starting point for the history of Kuchipudi as classical.

THE BRAHMIN IMPERSONATOR: THE HALLMARK OF KUCHIPUDI CLASSICAL DANCE

Alongside the transformation of Siddhendra's hagiography, sartorial impersonation is critical to Kuchipudi's classicization process. For the remainder of this chapter, I discuss the ways in which the performative ecology of twentieth-century India, both in dance and theatre, propelled the Kuchipudi brahmin impersonator to center stage. Uniquely benefiting from elite Telugu propaganda and the national fascination with theatrical impersonation, while also sidestepping anti-nautch

critique, the brahmin impersonator serves as the primary symbol of Kuchipudi as "classical" dance.

Impersonation and Indian Theatre

Impersonation has a lengthy history in South Asian textual, ritual, and performative contexts, and in the form of sartorial guising, it is most evident in the accounts of colonial Parsi, Marathi, and Gujarati theatre in western India. Although impersonation declined in Calcutta theatre in eastern India by the 1870s, the practice of male actors donning a woman's guise onstage was prevalent in western Indian theatre from the late nineteenth century until the 1930s, particularly on account of the social prescription against middle-class women performing in public (Singh 2009, 273).[38] Following the advent of professional Indian theatre companies, such as the Victoria Theatrical Company established in Bombay in 1868, a "premium was now placed on young men of pleasing figures and superlative voice, who would ensure company profits through their virtuosity in women's roles" (Hansen 1999, 132). These impersonators, as scholars of Indian theatre underscore, coexisted with actresses onstage but were uniquely sought after as men who embodied and represented an ideal notion of Indian womanhood (Hansen 1999; Singh 2009).[39]

Two impersonators—Jayshankar Sundari (1888–1967) and Bal Gandharva (1889–1975)—epitomize the national fascination with sartorial impersonation in Indian theatre. Kathryn Hansen's extensive research on both artists testifies to their skills in impersonation and their ability to shape ideals of Indian womanhood.[40] The former, Jayshankar Sundari, was a Gujarati stage impersonator who gained his epithet after performing the role of Sundari (a young wife) in the play *Saubhagya Sundari* in 1901. Sundari, as Hansen (1999, 134) notes, relied on a method of total identification with women, modeling specific roles on specific women he was acquainted with in his daily life. Sundari's success as an impersonator enabled him to shape ideals of Indian womanhood and, in fact, it was "a fashion for ladies in Bombay to imitate him in their daily lives" (135). In a paradoxical self-reflexive process, Sundari modeled his impersonation on society women who, in turn, modeled their presentation of womanhood on him (Hansen 2013, 209). Impersonation thus transcended the boundaries of the stage to shape everyday gender ideals, a point to which I return in the next chapter.

Bal Gandharva, an impersonator who dominated the Marathi stage from 1905 to 1955, was even more popular than Sundari in his presentation of an aesthetically idealized image of womanhood (Kosambi 2015, 268).[41] Gandharva even set fashions for women's dress and behavior and was responsible for popularizing specific styles of wearing saris, jewelry, and flowers. Medicinal tonic, soap, key chains, and toilet powder all displayed Gandharva's image in *vēṣam,* contributing to the commodification of gender guising more generally, while simultaneously normalizing the male body in a woman's guise (Hansen 1999, 135–36). Like Sundari, Gandharva had the ability to shape gender ideals offstage by donning a woman's

guise onstage.[42] Although the practice of sartorial impersonation was ubiquitous in western Indian theatre from the late nineteenth century until the advent of film in the 1930s, Sundari and Gandharva stand apart from their contemporaries. In 1955 and 1957, Gandharva and Sundari, respectively, were honored with the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award, the highest national award given to a practicing artist.[43] In 1964 and 1971, Gandharva and Sundari were each awarded the Padma Bhushan, the third-highest civilian award bestowed by the Government of India (Hansen 2013, 174). These national honors codified the ability of Gandharva and Sundari to shape ideals of respectable Indian womanhood and pushed against colonial perceptions of masculinity in early twentieth-century India. As Hansen (1999, 140) argues:

> [T]hrough the institution of female impersonation, a publicly visible, respectable image of "woman" was constructed, one that was of use to both men and women. This was a representation that, even attached to the male body, bespoke modernity. As one response to the British colonial discourse on Indian womanhood—the accusations against Indian men on account of their backward, degraded females—the representation helped support men, dovetailing with the emerging counter-discourse of Indian masculinity. Moreover, women derived from these enactments an image of how they should present themselves in public. Female impersonators, by bringing into the public sphere mannerisms, speech, and distinctive appearance of middle-class women, defined the external equivalents of the new gendered code of conduct for women. That such tastes were crafted by men (albeit men allegedly imitating women) gave them the imprimatur of acceptability.

In short, the image of respectable Indian womanhood in late colonial and post-colonial India became visible through the male body of the stage impersonator.

The complex performative ecology of Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatres is reflected in Telugu performance, particularly Telugu theatre and Kuchipudi dance. In the case of Telugu theatre, the most recognized impersonator from Telugu-speaking South India is Sthanam Narasimha Rao (1902–1971). First known for performing the role of Candramati in the play *Satya Hariscandra* in 1921, Sthanam (as he was commonly known) became enormously popular for his enactment of *strī-vēṣam* onstage (Nagabhushana Sarma 2013, 27). His notable performances include the role of Satyabhama in Muttaraju Subba Rao's play *Śrī Kṛṣṇa Tulābharam* and Madhuravani in Gurajada Appa Rao's play *Kanyāśulkam* (Nagabhushana Sarma 2013, 46–50, 54–57).[44] The vice president of India, Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, remarked after watching Sthanam perform Satyabhama in 1954:

> I had seen the play "Sri Krishna Tulabharam" some 30 years ago in Andhra and am glad to find that even today veteran actor Sri Sthanam maintained his body, poise and grace. He excelled in Satyabhama despite his advanced years and he still makes women blush and has now lived up to his reputation. (Nagabhushana Sarma 2013, 47)

Women watching Sthanam, according to Radhakrishnan, blushed at his abilities at donning a woman's guise, thereby underscoring the broader implications of impersonation beyond the context of staged performance. Like Sundari and Gandharva, Sthanam was nationally recognized for his skills in donning a woman's guise on the Telugu stage and presumably helped shape ideals of womanhood offstage.[45] As evidenced by the accounts of Sundari, Gandharva, and Sthanam, the ability to approximate an ideal image of womanhood onstage was highly valued in Indian theatre and dance; however, when this act of approximation bordered on effeminacy, impersonation became subject to critique.

Impersonation and Colonial Constraints

The enormous popularity of impersonators in twentieth-century Indian theatre must be situated in conversation with transforming perceptions of masculinity in colonial India. As Mrinalini Sinha (1995) has documented in detail, in late nineteenth-century colonial India an overdetermined opposition was constructed between the so-called "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali *babu*," the latter being a pejorative term used to characterize elite Bengali men.[46] When describing the development of the notion of the effeminate *bābu,* Sinha (1995, 2) further explains:

> In this colonial order of masculinity, the politically self-conscious Indian intellectuals occupied a unique place: they represented an 'unnatural' or 'perverted' form of masculinity. Hence this group of Indians, the most typical representatives of which at the time were middle-class Bengali Hindus, became the quintessential referents for that odious category designated as 'effeminate *babus*'.

By the late nineteenth century, effeminacy had evolved from characterizing the entire population of Bengal to specifically highlighting middle-class Indian elites, who at the time were beginning to challenge the colonial order (Sinha 1995, 16–17). A growing self-perception of effeminacy burgeoned among Bengali elite, and consequently, they attempted to redeem their own masculinity by appropriating the ideology of so-called "martial" traditions (Sinha 1995, 91–92).[47] The appropriation of colonial masculinity by Indian elites was particularly noticeable in the case of the well-known Bengali religious leader Vivekananda, who exhorted his countrymen to inculcate an ideal ascetic masculinity (Roy 1998, 105–10; Chakraborty 2011, 54).[48]

Alongside the voyeuristic pleasure of witnessing an impersonator pass as a woman onstage, there was an underlying uneasiness about male actors donning a woman's guise, both from colonial and Indian perspectives. *Scinde, or The Unhappy Valley,* a semi-biographical travelogue written by Orientalist writer Richard F. Burton in the mid-nineteenth century, includes the following passage describing northern Indian male Kathak performers dressed in a woman's guise:

> Conceive, if you can, the unholy spectacle of two reverend-looking grey-beards, with stern, severe, classical features, large limbs, and serene, majestic deportment, dancing opposite each other dressed in woman's attire; the flimsiest too, with light veils on their heads, and little bells jingling from their ankles, ogling, smirking, and displaying the juvenile playfulness of "—limmer lads and little lassies!" (1851, 247).

Margaret Walker (2016, 64) notes the "unconcealed scorn" present in Burton's description of the impersonators.[49] She goes on to state that although male Kathak dancers were relatively rare in both colonial travel writings and iconography, there was an underlying connection between these male Kathak performers who danced as women and vernacular theatre forms such as Nautanki, in which impersonation is prominent (64–65).

Similarly, in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Bengali and Maharashtrian theatre, impersonators began to be critiqued for their obscenity and ridiculous appearance (Singh 2009, 274). Anxieties around Indian masculinity contributed to these concerns:

> The whole issue of masculinity and effeminacy also came into the nationalist discourse. Female impersonators appeared to threaten the construction of masculinity; bringing it into the limelight seemed to reinvigorate stereotypes of weakness and inferiority among the male population, a bitter legacy of colonial domination. (275)

Theatre actors themselves expressed self-consciousness for donning a woman's guise onstage, worried that this sartorial mimicry might threaten their masculinity (Kaur 2013, 196; Kosambi 2015, 274–75). A push toward realism in Indian theatre and the growing presence of stage actresses also subtly contributed to the growing ambivalence of impersonators onstage.[50]

These competing notions of effeminacy and masculinity point to an evolving and ambivalent understanding of sartorial impersonation in colonial and postcolonial India. Within the context of staged performance, impersonation was (and continues to be) lauded as a highly stylized mimetic practice that manifests nationalist ideals of womanhood. However, beyond the circumscribed realm of performance, impersonation became subject to critique by broader colonial and postcolonial discourses on gender and sexuality. These tensions, as I outline in the chapters that follow, are not limited to mid-twentieth-century India, but continue to characterize the practice of impersonation on the contemporary Kuchipudi stage.

Impersonation in Kuchipudi Dance

Impersonation functions as the significant rite of passage for the village's brahmin male community, who today envision themselves as the "cultural brokers" (Hancock 1999, 64) of Kuchipudi's inherited tradition of authority (*sāmpradāyam*)

through the practice of impersonation. Grounded in the life story of Siddhendra, the practice of impersonation most notably appears in the vow taken by young brahmin inhabitants of Kuchelapuram (current Kuchipudi) to perform *Bhāmākalāpam* for generations to come. When describing this vow, Indian dance scholar Mohan Khokar (1957, 28) states:

> [Siddhendra] went to the village of Kuchelapuram and gathered a group of Brahmin boys who were prepared to assist him. With their help he produced and presented the play written by him. Lord Krishna was immensely pleased with Siddhendra Yogi who, in gratitude of this acknowledgement, took a vow from all the boys of Kuchelapuram who participated in his play that they would continue to enact [*Bhāmākalāpam*] at least once every year. They in turn further assured him that they would continue to see that their sons and grandsons continue to act the same play in the same way at the same village of Kuchelapuram. Thus it is that to this day the tradition of [*Bhāmākalāpam*] survives in the village of Kuchelapuram.

In continuing to perform *Bhāmākalāpam*, particularly the lead role of Satyabhama, Kuchipudi brahmin men envision impersonation as integral to the imagined cultural history of the Kuchipudi village and its eponymous dance form.

In the village today, all men from hereditary brahmin families must don Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam* at least once in their lives, irrespective of their skill or ability to perform. In fact, my interlocutors would often repeat the prescription—"Every man born in Kuchipudi must wear Satyabhama's *vēṣam* at least once in his life"—in everyday conversations. My interlocutors in the village would also proudly show me professional photographs of themselves in *vēṣam,* which were prominently displayed in their homes, thereby mirroring the interactions Joyce Flueckiger (2013, 69–70) had with male participants in *vēṣam* during the Gangamma *jātara* in Tirupati. Even nonbrahmins from outside of the village, such as the Hyderabad-based dancer Haleem Khan, raised to me Siddhendra's injunction to impersonate as the primary reason for donning Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam*. For these dancers, impersonation is viewed as a religious fulfillment to Siddhendra, who himself adopted a female voice in his devotional writings. Impersonation thus operates on two levels in the Kuchipudi imaginary: the poet speaking to his god through the voice of the female lover, and the dancer fulfilling his religious vows by impersonating the female character. The dual resonances of impersonation, on the level of narrative and staged performance, make it a uniquely significant practice for the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village.

The prominence of impersonation is further apparent in the historical biographies of dancers from the village. In a survey of notable performers and gurus in Kuchipudi dance from the late nineteenth century onwards, Jonnalagadda (1993) outlines the biographies of over thirty brahmin male dancers from the village known for donning the *strī-vēṣam*. While there may have been popular

impersonators from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, there are no surviving historical records of these earlier generations of Kuchipudi performance history. In fact, only two impersonators—Vempati Venkatanarayana (1871–1935) and Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma (1934–2012)—are particularly noteworthy in Kuchipudi dance memory. The former was a mythic guru credited for his performances of Satyabhama in *Bhāmākalāpam* (Jonnalagadda 1993, 165–66; Usha Gayatri 2016, 186).[51] The latter was a mid-twentieth-century performer who is undoubtedly the most popular impersonator from the Kuchipudi village (Jonnalagadda 1993, 131). While little is known about Venkatanarayana, far more documentation exists for Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, who was and continues to be wildly popular for his skills of impersonation, a point that I will discuss in detail in the next chapter.

Handpicked by well-known Kuchipudi guru Chinta Krishna Murthy (1912–1969), Satyanarayana Sarma was an instant success due to his skills in impersonation, particularly his enactments of Satyabhama in *Bhāmākalāpam* and Usha in the *yakṣagāna Uṣā-pariṇayam* (Nagabhushana Sarma 2016, 154). The village troupe, Venkatarama Natya Mandali, which was led by Krishna Murthy and featured Satyanarayana Sarma in *strī-vēṣam*, was chosen to represent Kuchipudi in national dance festivals, seminars, and tours, including those sponsored by the state-based arts organization Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi (APSNA) (Nagabhushana Sarma 2016, 154–59). For example, the "Kuchipudi Nritya Sadassu" (Seminar on Kuchipudi Dance) hosted by APSNA in 1959, in which dancers and scholars publicly asserted Kuchipudi's "classical" status, featured a performance by Satyanarayana Sarma in *Gollākalāpam* (lit., "the lyrical drama of Gollabhama") (Putcha 2013, 104).[52] Recipient of several national awards, Satyanarayana Sarma was later selected to tour nationally throughout Europe and the United States in the 1980s (see chapter 2). Through the support of village elders and elite patrons, Satyanarayana Sarma was quickly promoted as the face of Kuchipudi dance in the mid-twentieth century, mirroring Bal Gandharva, Jayshankar Sundari, and Sthanam Narasimha Rao before him.

Disentangling the imagined authority given to the practice of impersonation from the critical history of that practice is a complicated process. On the one hand, impersonation appears simply as a rite of passage required by the hagiography of Siddhendra and, therefore, it would seem that all village brahmin men must, at the very least, attempt to impersonate. However, this relatively straightforward injunction is implicated in the broader historical processes traced thus far, namely the mid-twentieth-century expansion of Siddhendra's life story and the concurrent classicization of Kuchipudi dance. Dovetailing with the enormous popularity of impersonation in Indian theatre, the brahmin impersonator of the Kuchipudi village was accorded a position of prominence in state-sponsored public appearances in the mid-twentieth century. At the same time, elaborate hagiographies of Siddhendra, which provided the religious grounding for the practice

of impersonation, were disseminated in printed sources. In other words, the Kuchipudi impersonator gained national prominence in Kuchipudi dance at the same time that elite Telugu proponents began vocalizing a highly devotionalized version of Siddhendra's hagiography.[53]

It is noteworthy that impersonation is also a distinguishing element of Kuchipudi dance that sets it apart from Bharatanatyam, the dance form that is said to be a "revival" of the *devadāsī* performance repertoire (Allen 1997). While the history of Bharatanatyam is firmly entrenched in the quagmire of anti-nautch sentiments of colonial South India, Kuchipudi—an ostensibly brahminical, male-only dance form from the heart of Telugu South India—was able to sidestep controversies of courtesan involvement in order to gain its classical status. Despite the fact that *devadāsī* women had long-standing interactions with South Indian brahmins and despite the fact that the female solo repertoire was discreetly adopted into the Kuchipudi fold, particularly through the efforts of guru Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, the history of the *devadāsī* performer herself is lost in the broader classicization of Kuchipudi (Soneji 2012, 267n11; Putcha 2015, 12–13, 19). In her place, the brahmin impersonator from the Kuchipudi village became the face of Kuchipudi classical dance in postcolonial South India. The nexus of performance, religion, gender, caste, and patronage thereby converge upon the body of the brahmin impersonator to create the central script for Kuchipudi as classical dance. In sum, impersonation is not only a prescriptive act required for all Kuchipudi brahmin men but also the central practice that distinguishes Kuchipudi as classical.

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The genealogy of Telugu dance is grounded in a paradoxical landscape that silences the *devadāsī* performer while legitimating the male body in *strī-vēṣam*. Scholarly histories of South Indian dance interrogate popular narratives of revival and respectability to underscore the explicit marginalization of *devadāsī* communities in colonial and postcolonial formations of Indian dance and music (Srinivasan 1985; Meduri 1988; Allen 1997; Soneji 2012; Putcha 2015). Yet, aside from the few notable exceptions discussed above, scholarship on South Indian dance forms overlooks the key role of the male dancer in contributing to and shaping the revival of South Indian dance. This chapter contributes to the growing body of scholarship on South Indian performance by analyzing the twentieth-century processes that enabled the construction of Siddhendra as the *bhakti* saint and the concurrent prominence bestowed upon the brahmin impersonator. My intention, however, is not to authorize the brahmin male dance as somehow more legitimate than the *devadāsī* performer in the landscape of South Indian dance. Rather, by interrogating the inherited narrative of Kuchipudi hagiography and performance, I call into question the processes by which Siddhendra, the poet-saint, and the village brahmin impersonator came to occupy center stage.

It is also important to note that the contested history described in this chapter is mostly unknown among Kuchipudi practitioners in the contemporary period. While scholarly debates revolve around lingering questions underlying Kuchipudi's history, many practitioners I encountered during fieldwork spoke of Kuchipudi without raising these issues. Rather than focusing on topics of classicization, courtesans, or statehood, practitioner accounts rested on a different set of themes, primarily the hagiography of Siddhendra, the evolution of Kuchipudi performance genres (from *Bhāmākalāpam* to solo items), and the legacy of twentieth-century dancers and gurus who helped shape the artistry and performance techniques of Kuchipudi today.

The competing visions of Kuchipudi dance may be reconciled by suggesting that scholarly histories are more "accurate" while practitioner accounts are "constructed" in the contemporary period. However, as a scholar and practitioner of Kuchipudi dance with investments in the ethnographic enterprise as a form of feminist practice (Abu-Lughod 1990), I am reluctant to overlook the ways in which Kuchipudi dancers speak about their dance, however recent such discussions may be. In the ethnographic study and performance analysis of Kuchipudi that follows, I focus primarily on the contemporary context of Kuchipudi dancers, for whom Siddhendra is a significant persona, the village of Kuchipudi a historic place, and Kuchipudi dance an uncontestably classical tradition. My ethnographic accounts of the practitioners from the village give voice to their perspectives, and I ground my analytical work in their words. My theoretical approach, however, is framed by Kuchipudi's contentious past, particularly the ways in which the brahmin male body is scripted as the authoritative vehicle to express its classical status. This dual attentiveness to historical processes and to present sensibilities shapes my theorizations of both Kuchipudi as village *and* Kuchipudi as dance.