

“I am Satyabhama”

Constructing Hegemonic Brahmin Masculinity in the Kuchipudi Village

The melodious voice of D.S.V. Sastry, a brahmin male singer raised in the Kuchipudi village, resounded across the D.S.T. Auditorium at the University of Hyderabad on the evening of January 20, 2011.

Bhāmanē Satyabhāmanē. I am Bhama, I am Satyabhama.

Bhāmanē Satyabhāmanē. I am Bhama, I am Satyabhama.

Seated on stage right along with senior Kuchipudi guru Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma playing the cymbals (*naṭṭuvāṅgam*) and accompanied by an orchestra, Sastry filled the spaces of the auditorium with the lyrics of Satyabhama’s introductory song. The stage lights began to rise, and a veiled figure appeared from behind the orchestra and moved to stage left, his swinging gait synchronized with the rhythms of the item’s seven-beat time-measure (*misra-chāpu*): *ta-ki-ṭa-ta-ka-dhi-mi*. Once across the stage, the dancer cast off his veil and grasped the long braid hanging down his back, deftly pulling it over his shoulders in front of him. As the dancer slowly turned around, the audience finally caught a glimpse of Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao, or Venku as he is commonly referred to, in Satyabhama’s *vēṣam* (guise).

Although I had gone backstage to photograph Venku’s makeup session prior to the start of the performance, I was still surprised to witness his onstage transformation. Backstage Venku was casually dressed in a white undershirt (*banyan*) lined by dark chest hairs, a floor-length cotton garment (*luṅgi*) wrapped around his waist. Now wearing a white and red silken costume, Venku shone under the spotlights onstage, his face completely altered by layers of makeup that had been carefully applied by a professional makeup artist. For the three-hour *Bhāmākalāpam*

performance, Venku captivated the audience with his skills of impersonation, expressed not only through his costume and gait, but also through affectations of his voice when he spoke as Satyabhama during dramatic conversations. As I sat watching Venku enact Satyabhama that evening, I could feel the palpable energy of the auditorium, which was filled with three hundred raucous university students and members of the Hyderabad dance community. They laughed at Satyabhama's glib remarks to her confidante Madhavi and applauded her final union with Krishna, all while relishing the aesthetic pleasure of watching Venku's cis male body in *strī-vēṣam* (woman's guise).

That evening's *Bhāmākalāpam* performance reminded me of my interview with Venku nine months earlier in his urban Vijayawada apartment. A cup of milky chai in hand and his daughter playing at his feet, Venku spoke earnestly about his journey as a dancer and impersonator. Venku is the most skilled impersonator of the younger generation of brahmin performers from the village and he has worked hard over the years to distinguish himself from Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, the most famous Kuchipudi impersonator of the twentieth century. Despite Venku's challenges of supporting his family while making a name for himself as a male dancer and impersonator, he adheres to a rather rigid notion of tradition (*sāmpradāyam*). When I asked him what he thought about the increasing presence of women dancing Kuchipudi, Venku was straightforward in his response:

First we must uphold the tradition (*sāmpradāyam*). From what I know, it's in order for the tradition to not get lost. I mean changes might come and the tradition must change . . . But first Siddhendra had a rule that men should dance . . . Up until this point, men have been mostly enacting *Bhāmākalāpam*. Nowadays, there's a few more women performing. But the ones you see, you can count on your fingers. Because there have been so many men who have been upholding the tradition, I think it's better if men continue on with it.

I found Venku's answer unsettling, especially given his warm demeanor and openness toward my research. As I have come to learn, Venku's observations regarding Kuchipudi tradition reflect a broader sentiment within the village's brahmin community. For my interlocutors, the *Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama and Satyabhama's role, more specifically, is only rendered legible through the brahmin male body, even in the context of transnational Kuchipudi dance in which female dancers outnumber their male counterparts. Despite the transnational Kuchipudi landscape, within the village, hereditary brahmin men hold power as bearers of tradition (*sāmpradāyam*), both in the domains of performance and everyday life.

This chapter explores the technologies of power undergirding the practice of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village, particularly in relation to the production of hegemonic brahmin masculinity. Due to an originary prohibition against

female performers in early forms of Kuchipudi dance, brahmin dancers from the village would don elaborate costume and makeup to enact both male and female roles from Hindu religious narratives. The enactment of Satyabhama's role is undoubtedly the most important *vēṣam* for the brahmins of the village due to the prescription of Siddhendra described in the previous chapter. The earliest village performances of the introductory item in which Satyabhama declares, "I am Bhama [woman], I am Satyabhama [True Woman]," were danced by brahmin men. Although all brahmin men are required to dance Satyabhama once in their lives, impersonation as a rite of passage is not its only social function. Rather, impersonation is a practice of power that creates normative ideals of gender and caste in village performance and everyday life, particularly as the practice of impersonation onstage spills into personation offstage (Mankekar 2015).

To set the stage, the chapter begins with the mechanics of impersonation. Drawing on the Kuchipudi lexicon, I focus on three embodied techniques of impersonation: costume (*āhārya*), speech (*vācika*), and bodily movement (*āṅgika*). In each technique, Kuchipudi brahmin male dancers draw on idealized understandings of "real" women's bodies while, paradoxically, limiting their female counterparts from performance. The latter half of this chapter focuses on Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, the most famous impersonator of the twentieth century. By excelling in the one factor central to traditional Kuchipudi performance—the donning of Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam*—Satyanarayana Sarma establishes the norm that epitomizes hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the Kuchipudi village (Connell 1995). Satyanarayana Sarma's mythic practices of impersonation create the paradigmatic ideal for his gender and caste community, an ideal that is ultimately illusory and impossible for any other performer to fully embody. In their failure to impersonate in the manner of their famous predecessor, younger performers like Venku adhere to *normative* brahmin masculinity, an emergent form of hegemonic masculinity that is always in process but never fully hegemonic (Inhorn 2012). To be a successful impersonator in the Kuchipudi village, one must impersonate Satyanarayana Sarma impersonating Satyabhama.

SARTORIAL TRANSFORMATIONS: THE EMBODIED TECHNIQUES OF IMPERSONATION

Impersonation in the Kuchipudi village most commonly involves a sartorial transformation of the brahmin male dancer into a given female character. Kuchipudi dancers, such as Venku described in the opening vignette, not only wear elaborate jewelry and makeup, but also alter the pitch of their voice and the swing of their gait to don the *strī-vēṣam*. When discussing the practices of impersonation, Kuchipudi dancers often raise the concept of *abhinaya* (mimetic mode of expression), particularly as it is referenced in Sanskrit texts on dramaturgy

and aesthetics, namely Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* (ca. 300 CE) and Nandikeshvara's *Abhinayadarpaṇa* (ca. tenth to thirteenth centuries CE).¹ In the eighth chapter of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Bharata describes four types of *abhinaya*: bodily gesture (*āṅgika*), speech and dialogue (*vācika*), makeup and costume (*āhārya*), and temperament (*sāttvika*) (*Nāṭyaśāstra* VIII.9).² These four categories of *abhinaya*, as postulated by Bharata and elaborated by Nandikeshvara, were frequently referenced in my interviews and conversations with Kuchipudi performers and scholars, even more often than Bharata's well-known theory of *rasa* (aesthetic taste).

The appeal to premodern Sanskrit texts, namely Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Nandikeshvara's *Abhinayadarpaṇa*, on the part of my interlocutors is reflective of what Uttara Asha Coorlawala (2004) refers to as "Sanskritized dance." According to Coorlawala, texts such as Bharata's *Nāṭyaśāstra* became the Sanskrit framework of Indian dance, particularly in the context of the newly revived South Indian dance form, Bharatanatyam:

This linking of dance with continuous lineages of oral practice and recovered authoritative texts—acceptable to newly embraced western scholarship—has come to be recognized as a characteristic of Sanskritized dance . . . "Sanskritization" had come to denote a deliberate self-conscious return to ancient Vedic and brahminical values and customs from a new intellectual perspective, (often but not necessarily in response to "Westernization"). The term is often used synonymously with brahminization, because Sanskrit had been the exclusive preserve of brahmin males. In dance, [S]anskritization has become a legitimizing process by which dance forms designated as "ritual," "folk," or simply insignificant, attain social and politico-artistic status which brings the redesignation, "classical." (53–54)³

The convergence of Sanskrit texts, brahminical tradition, and classical dance is certainly evident in the context of Kuchipudi, a dance form that became Sanskritized and classicized over the course of the twentieth century.⁴ Although my interlocutors unequivocally accept Kuchipudi as an ancient dance form rooted in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and other Sanskrit texts, it is important to underscore the twentieth-century-processes of classicization as noted by Coorlawala and others (see introduction). In this chapter, I draw on the Sanskrit lexicon of Kuchipudi dance to analyze the techniques of impersonation, while also recognizing the social-historical contexts that enabled Kuchipudi to become a Sanskritized classical dance form. Although I am fully aware of the problematic attempts to Sanskritize Kuchipudi, as an ethnographer of dance, I also take seriously the words that my interlocutors use to describe their dance practices. In the discussion that follows, I analyze three embodied techniques of impersonation: costume (*āhārya*), speech (*vācika*), and bodily movement (*āṅgika*). In each of these cases, Kuchipudi impersonators transform their physical appearances to approximate an idealized understanding of "real" women's bodies within the context of staged performance.

Āhārya abhinaya

Āhārya abhinaya, which refers to costume and makeup, is a critical feature of any performance given by a Kuchipudi impersonator. The application of makeup, donning a wig, putting on ornaments, and wearing a silk costume are crucial embodied techniques of impersonation. Chinta Ravi Balakrishna, a young brahmin dancer from Kuchipudi, described to me the importance of costume (*āhārya*): “Once I put on the hair bun, bangles, and the rest of the costume, I think to myself: ‘I am not Ravi Balakrishna. I am that female dancer. I am Satyabhama.’ Thinking that, I get onto the stage.”

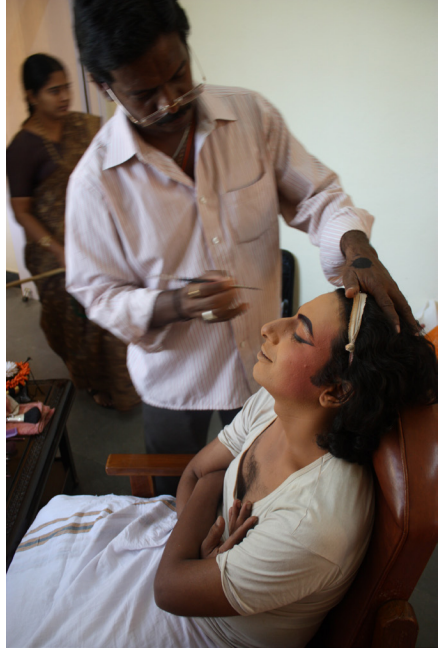
The impact of sartorial guising on Ravi Balakrishna’s experience parallels the words of early twentieth-century Gujarati theatre impersonator Jayshankar Sundari. When describing the first time he wore a woman’s blouse, Sundari writes in his autobiography (alternating between third- and first-person voice):

At the moment when Jayshankar first attired himself in a *choli* and *lahanga* [blouse and full skirt], he was transformed into a woman, or rather into the artistic form that expresses the feminine sensibility. A beautiful young woman revealed herself inside me. Her shapely, intoxicating youth sparkled. Her feminine charm radiated fragrance. She had an easy grace in her eyes, and in her gait was the glory of Gujarat. She was not a man, she was a woman...and for that instant I felt as though I was not a man. (Hansen 2015, 266)⁵

Both Ravi Balakrishna’s and Sundari’s observations regarding the transformative processes of impersonation bear resemblance to Saba Mahmood’s (2005) analysis of the embodied practices of prayer and veiling for the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. For Mahmood’s female mosque participants, external bodily acts such as prayer and veiling are “the *critical markers* of piety as well as the *ineluctable means* by which one trains oneself to be pious,” thereby serving as a form of *habitus* (158).⁶ In the case of Kuchipudi, the pre-performance steps of donning the *strī-vēṣam* initiate gender transformation; the elaborate process of applying makeup, donning a wig, and wearing a silk costume transform not only the external appearance of the impersonator but also his internal gender identification. External bodily acts, in this case costume and makeup, are said to inculcate an internal ideal of womanhood in the body of the impersonator.⁷

Mirroring Ravi Balakrishna’s words is a description of the legendary Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma. A 1973 documentary by the India Films Division featuring Satyanarayana Sarma describes the importance of costume and makeup for his practice of impersonation:

No sooner did [Satyanarayana Sarma] wear a female wig, ornaments, and *pāyal* [bells, that he acquired] feminine traits. That state of mind used to last for quite some time. After he removed the female makeup and wore *dhōti* and *kurta*, the original masculinity of Satyanarayan used to set in again. Until then, he used to feel like a female.⁸





FIGURES 5–11. Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao donning Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam*. Photos by author.

Avinash Pasricha, a noted Indian dance photographer, has had the opportunity of photographing Satyanarayana Sarma in his green room in Mumbai while the dancer spent his usual three hours getting ready for a performance. The series of photographs depict Satyanarayana Sarma applying his makeup, adjusting his wig, plaiting his hair, and putting on his costume (Kothari and Pasricha 2001, 58–59).⁹ Pasricha described to me that while photographing Satyanarayana Sarma, he witnessed a step-by-step metamorphosis of the stalwart impersonator into Satyabhama.

In an attempt to replicate Pasricha's series, I photographed Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao donning the guise of Satyabhama prior to the *Bhāmākalāpam* performance in January 2011 discussed in the opening vignette of this chapter (see Figures 5–11). The second photograph of the series shows Venku leaning back in his chair, dressed casually in a white *banyan* (undershirt) and *lungi* (traditional garment worn around the waist), as a professional makeup artist draws the graceful shape of a feminine eyebrow, paintbrush in hand. After applying liberal amounts of spirit gum, the makeup artist secures a long black wig on Venku's head and braids the hair into place. The braid, which is particularly important for Satyabhama's character, is overlaid with a long golden ornament representing the sun, moon, and twenty-seven stars (Kapaleswara Rao 1996, 83).¹⁰ With the help of special U-shaped bobby pins, Venku secures a circular bun and half-ring bun on the crown of his head, wrapping the two buns with rows of white and orange paper flowers. After a final round of makeup, Venku wears the silken red and white costume of Satyabhama's character. The entire process takes approximately two hours, beginning with makeup and ending in Satyabhama's *vēṣam*.¹¹

In "The Art of Female Impersonation," Andhra Natyam impersonator Kalakrishna (1996) describes the corporeal requirements of donning the *strī-vēṣam*.¹² Although not belonging to a hereditary Kuchipudi brahmin family, Kalakrishna's observations in this article are useful for analyzing the embodied practices of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village. In particular, Kalakrishna outlines the various practices of body padding, which my interlocutors were often reluctant to discuss outright with me:

One who wants to personify a female role in [a] dance drama or in [a] solo dance item must necessarily practice the various movements of neck, extremities and his body according to the structure of his body to bring out the delicate feminine movements suitable to the role he plays. Sufficient care must be taken so that the muscles do not develop like that of an athlete. Generally a youth between 14 and 24 years of age will be able to bring out the delicate nuances of a woman in his movements. So he can play female roles up to 25 years of age. He can continue to play the female roles as long as he has control over his body, if he should not retire . . .

A man who takes up female roles must be very careful in his make-up, selection of dress, ornaments, hair dressing etc., according to his height and weight. Only then would his getup suit well the role he is to depict. To make his body appear like that

of a woman he must use necessary padding wherever it is required in the dress. In particular a solo dancer should practice at least 5 times with full costume so that he gets accustomed to the extra heaviness during movements of the body, leg, and hand.

Earlier the male artists who played female roles used to grow their natural hair long just like that of women. Even then they took care to cover their masculine features with a wooden ornament called ‘*Ganiyam*.’ Now female impersonators can select suitable wigs to suit the structure of their head and face. (67)

Kalakrishna delineates an ideal age and body composition for the male dancer impersonating a female character. Regulatory practices of the body, akin to the techniques discussed by Phillip Zarrilli (2000) in Kathakali dance, mold the impersonator’s body to portray “delicate feminine movements.” Particular kinds of ornamentation, along with body padding to cover “masculine features,” also enable the practice of sartorial impersonation.

In line with Kalakrishna’s observations, Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma, a senior guru from the Kuchipudi village, also emphasized the importance of observing differences in bodily appearance:

Kuchipudi artists need to do so much research to enact a female character. They need to research how to wear the wig and how to do the makeup. They need to do research on how the female hairline is, in order to put the wig on in the right way. Some women have even hairlines, and some women have curls on their faces. So you have to observe those things and make the curls in the right way. That’s why those people who do female impersonation need to do research.

Rattayya Sarma’s emphasis on “research,” which he referenced using the English language term rather than its Telugu equivalent, suggests that Kuchipudi male dancers draw on real-life examples when impersonating a female character. Similarly, aforementioned Gujarati impersonator Jayshankar Sundari is said to have studied young women from elite families and modeled his stage personas based on these observances (Hansen 2015, 266). Anuradha Kapur (2004) notes an anecdote from Sundari’s life when he was introduced to a young woman, Gulab, at his uncle’s home. Later, when her parents went to see Sundari’s new play, they remarked: “But this is our daughter, Gulab!” (100).

As discussed in chapter 1, all brahmin men from hereditary Kuchipudi families are required to don Satyabhama’s *vēṣam* at least once in their life, thereby fulfilling a vow made to their founding saint Siddhendra. Despite this vow, not all Kuchipudi brahmin men are adept at impersonation. Pasumarti Keshav Prasad, an expert at organizing festivals and performances in the village of Kuchipudi, described his own one-time experience of taking on the *strī-vēṣam*:

We all learned Kuchipudi and had to take on a female role at least once. I also wore it once, but just for fun. I wasn’t a professional performer when I wore it, but I wanted

to have that experience of donning a female role at least once. The reason is because Siddhendra Yogi had a vow for all of the Kuchipudi people. Every man who is born in Kuchipudi needs to wear Satyabhama's *vēṣam* at least once in his life . . . Otherwise, why would I do it? My face doesn't suit a female role. I look like a *rākṣasa* [demon].

The success of Kuchipudi impersonation is not simply dependent upon the artistic skill of a given performer, but also his appeal in female makeup and costume. The more appealing (and convincing) a performer looks donning the *strī-vēṣam*, the more likely he is at being a successful impersonator.¹³ In all of these discussions, Kuchipudi impersonators draw on their own idealized perceptions of gendered bodies when approaching the practice of impersonation. Impersonators must not only wear appropriate padding to cover up "masculine" features, but also regulate their bodily appearance to prevent the growth of unwanted musculature, thereby effecting a "delicate feminine" appearance onstage. Keshav Prasad mirrors this sentiment when suggesting that his "face doesn't suit a female role." By likening his own impersonation to a demon in a woman's guise, Keshav Prasad positions himself outside of this normative gender ideal.

Rattayya Sarma draws on his own "research" of women in everyday life when approaching the embodied techniques of *āhārya*, particularly with respect to wearing a wig and applying makeup. Rattayya Sarma's "research" of hairlines, however, is not simply an observation of the women around him, but also a prescription for how male dancers should impersonate variations across women's bodies. For Rattayya Sarma, there is a "right way" of wearing curls on the face, and the successful impersonator is one who observes women's hair in daily life and replicates this "research" onstage. Underlying Rattayya Sarma's suggestions is an idealized perception of "real" women's bodies as they are presented within staged performance.

Vācika abhinaya

In contemporary Kuchipudi performances enacted by village brahmin men, such as the one described at the beginning of this chapter, dancers are accompanied by a professional orchestra seated on stage right. The main orchestra members, who are also from village brahmin families, include a senior guru playing the cymbals (*naṭṭuvāṅgam*), a lead vocalist trained in Karnatak music, and a percussionist playing the double-barrel drum (*mrdāṅgam*).¹⁴ The vocalist sings the dance items of a given performance, such as Satyabhama's introductory song, while the dancer lip-synchs the song to give the effect of singing the piece himself. When the performance shifts to a dramatic scene between characters, such as a conversation between Satyabhama and her confidante Madhavi, the dancers speak their dialogues in front of a microphone (or sometimes two microphones) positioned toward the front of the stage.¹⁵ Notably, the use of microphones and the staging of performances in a proscenium theatrical context is a twentieth-century transformation in Kuchipudi dance (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 46; Bhikshu 260–61).

The Kuchipudi impersonator performing roles such as Satyabhama must modulate his voice to be soft and high-pitched. Rattayya Sarma described how male performers must modulate the pitch of their voice to fit a particular female character's age and context. Rattayya Sarma referred to two Sanskrit categories of heroines when discussing *vācika*: Satyabhama is a mature heroine (*prauḍa-nāyikā*), so her voice must sound different from the character of Usha, a naive heroine (*mugdha-nāyikā*) and lead character of the *yakṣagāna Uṣā-pariṇayam*. *Vācika* (voice), as prescribed by these dancers, must also vary within a single character. For example, the voice modulation of Satyabhama describing herself with pride should be different from the voice modulation of the same Satyabhama telling Madhavi she is too shy to speak her husband's name in public. Ravi Balakrishna observed:

When Satyabhama is doing her introductory song, she speaks with pride about her beauty, and with *gambhīram* [strength], so you cannot have a soft modulation. But in the next item *Siggāyanōyamma daruvu*, you need to speak softly because she is shy . . . In the item *Madana daruvu*, [when Satyabhama describes her pains of separation], there must be a trembling voice when speaking . . . With this trembling voice, the *Madana daruvu* comes properly . . . The voice modulation needs to be based upon what is the character, what is the situation, and what is the context.

As Ravi Balakrishna's comments suggest, the Kuchipudi male artist does not simply project a falsetto voice to perform *strī-vēṣam*, but rather manipulates *vācika* based on the identity, situation, and context of a given character.

Yeleswarapu Srinivas, a younger dancer and instructor at the Siddhendra Kalakshetra, outlined the process of learning *vācika* from his gurus:

Our gurus taught us that however women talk, you should talk like that. The gurus used to teach us how to talk when acting as female characters . . . When you are talking as a female, the voice should come from your throat. When you are talking as a male, it should come deeper . . . When you are using a female voice, you compress the tracts of your throat. When it comes to a male character, you should open the throat.

I had the opportunity of watching Srinivas teach *Bhāmākalāpam* to two female students pursuing an MA in Kuchipudi dance from the Siddhendra Kalakshetra. When teaching the students the dialogue before the *Siggāyanōyamma daruvu*, a solo item in which Satyabhama states that she is too shy to speak her husband's name, Srinivas insisted that one of the female students, whose voice was naturally low in vocal register, modulate her voice to make it softer and higher in pitch. Srinivas demonstrated the lines for her by modulating his voice in a higher pitch and suggested that she follow his example. When describing the voice of early twentieth-century impersonator Bal Gandharva, Kathryn Hansen (1999) notes that Gandharva's voice was not falsetto, but rather between male and female registers, like many stage actors at the time. Gandharva's spoken voice onstage "is said

to have been an idealized version of (presumably upper-caste) women's speech" (Hansen 1999, 136). A comparable idealized understanding of women's speech frames Srinivas's approach to *vācika* in his classroom. Much like Rattayya Sarma in the discussion of costume, there is a "right way" to speak as a female character, and dancers, both male and female, must modulate their voices to achieve an ideal "feminine" pitch. In Srinivas's classroom, it was the male teacher rather than the female students who articulated and achieved this ideal.

Āṅika abhinaya

Along with dress and voice, movements of the body, or *āṅika abhinaya*, are crucial to the practice of impersonation. Kuchipudi dancers observe the bodily movements of women around them in order to portray the *āṅika* of a female character. Satyanarayana Sarma, for example, "carefully observe[s] how a woman walks, talks, shows anger, love, indifference, etc. And he trie[s] to incorporate such movements in delineating the character" (Nagabhushana Sarma 2012, 22). Venku observes differences in women's movements based on age when performing the characters of Satyabhama and Usha, respectively:

My guru [Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma] told me, "This is how Usha should be and this is how Satyabhama should be." Usha is actually a young girl, right? He used to tell me to observe. He would tell me to observe girls studying in middle school or girls studying in the tenth grade. They have a type of humility and shyness that they don't even realize. There's a difference between a twenty-eight or twenty-nine-year-old girl [like Satyabhama] and a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old girl [like Usha]. Once they have gotten to twenty-nine, their mind is matured. When they talk or walk, they have a certain freeness either in their body or their speech. But with fourteen-year-old girls, there is some shyness inside that they don't even realize.

Following the example of his guru Rattayya Sarma, Venku watches the girls around him to refine his bodily movements across female characters of different ages. Like Rattayya Sarma in the case of *āhārya*, both Satyanarayana Sarma and Venku research the movements of women in daily life to portray *āṅika* within the context of staged performance.

What are the specific bodily gestures (*āṅika*) performed by Kuchipudi impersonators? Based on observations of both archival performance videos at the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi and live performances of Kuchipudi impersonators in Hyderabad, Bangalore, Chennai, and the Kuchipudi village, I compiled a list of stylized gestures of the body used by the male Kuchipudi performer donning the *strī-vēṣam*. The gestures include batting the eyelashes, casting shy sideways glances, turning the mouth, biting the finger, shaking the hands, rotating the shoulders, adjusting the top pleats of the sari, holding the bottom pleats of the costume, and standing with the toe pointed in a position called *sūci-pādam*. Not all Kuchipudi impersonators employ all these gestures; rather, some of these gestures

occur as trademark features in the performances of particular impersonators. For example, Satyanarayana Sarma is known for casting shy sideways glances when playing a female character, while Venku usually holds the bottom pleats of his costume and stands with his toe pointed in *sūcī-pādam* when donning the *strī-vēṣam* (see Figure 11). All of the aforementioned gestures, except for perhaps turning the mouth and casting shy sideways glances, are exaggerated by male Kuchipudi dancers but downplayed by female dancers from outside the village.¹⁶

This difference in male versus female performance was made apparent to me when I learned the majority of *Bhāmākalāpam* from Vedantam Radheshyam, a guru from a hereditary Kuchipudi brahmin family and instructor at the Siddhendra Kalakshetra in the Kuchipudi village. The one pedagogical instance I found most challenging and most informative in Radheshyam's classroom was learning the *Raṅgugā nā meḍa daruvu*, an item in which Satyabhama asks how Krishna could have forgotten the marriage necklace he tied around her neck. In the second and third stanzas of the item, Satyabhama recalls her first night of lovemaking with Krishna, particularly the ways in which he kissed her and placed his hands upon her breasts. Learning this item was challenging for me, not because of the explicit sexual content of the lyrics, but rather because of the ways in which the lyrics were visualized through embodied performance. Radheshyam's version of this *daruvu* fully used the gestures of *āṅgika abhinaya* listed above, particularly excessive movement of the shoulders and biting of the lower lip, which I had never learned from my female Kuchipudi teachers in India or the United States. I had clearly embodied the restrictions on erotic expression (*śṛṅgāra*) imposed on Indian classical dance by Rukmini Arundale in the mid-twentieth century (Meduri 1988, 8; Coorlawala 2004, 55). As a Telugu brahmin woman dancing in the village, I struggled to express eroticism in the manner demanded by my brahmin male teacher. Radheshyam, by contrast, seemed entirely unconcerned with such restrictions on female bodily comportment and encouraged me to exaggerate my gestures further.

The paradox of bodily gestures and gait (*āṅgika*) is that while female dancers rarely employ exaggerated gestures, Kuchipudi impersonators use them to effect an ostensibly "feminine" appearance onstage. When the impersonator turns his mouth, moves his shoulders, or holds the pleats of his costume, he affirms to the witnessing audience that he is, in fact, a woman.¹⁷ But what kind of woman? The female characters that Kuchipudi impersonators perform onstage are not everyday women but idealized perceptions of "real" women's bodies enacted through stylized costume, voice, and movement. By adjusting his curls, modulating the pitch of his voice, and biting his lip, the impersonator approximates an idealized understanding of what it means to appear as a woman. Implicit in this approximation is a standard of realness, or the attempt to effect a gender ideal onstage that cannot be construed as artifice (Butler [1993] 2011, 88). In donning a woman's guise, the Kuchipudi impersonator must observe real women around him, and then transform his physical appearance to effect this realness within performance. The

ultimate impersonator, therefore, is one for whom “the approximation of realness appears to be achieved, the body performing and ideal performed appear indistinguishable” (88). When the impersonator can *pass* as a woman, both onstage and off, only then is the approximation of realness truly achieved.

SATYANARAYANA SARMA AS SATYABHAMA

The single performer synonymous with the practice of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village, and the Kuchipudi dance context more broadly, is Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma (1935–2012). Although Kuchipudi guru and impersonator Vempati Venkatanarayana (1871–1935) is thought to have promoted *Bhāmākalāpam* during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is Satyanarayana Sarma who is more frequently associated with the character of Satyabhama (Jonnalagadda 1993, 131, 165–66). As described in the opening vignette of this book, Satyanarayana Sarma exhibits an ease in donning Satyabhama’s *strī-vēṣam* and his skills of impersonation enable him to achieve a standard of realness that far surpasses his counterparts in the Kuchipudi village.

In fact, the rhythm of life in Kuchipudi seems dictated by Satyanarayana Sarma’s presence, or absence, in the village. His occasional appearance to conduct morning rituals at the Ramalingeshvara temple during my fieldwork was illustrative of his authoritative status. The first time I saw him at the temple during my extended stay in the village, the priest of the adjacent Siddhendra temple rushed to my side, proclaiming as if he had spotted a celebrity, “Satyanarayana Sarma has come!” Clad in carefully ironed silk garments with three distinctive strokes of sacred ash covering his forehead, Satyanarayana Sarma marked his status through his fine attire, which was distinct from the often unkempt, white cotton garments of many of my other elder brahmin male interlocutors. Through his dress alone, Satyanarayana Sarma established himself as the paragon of brahminical and upper-class masculinity.

When I approached Satyanarayana Sarma to conduct a formal interview, he politely declined, stating that his health was fragile due to a recent illness, and he was unable to speak at length about any subject. Disappointed, particularly because Satyanarayana Sarma had assured me a few months prior to my stay in Kuchipudi that he would speak with me, I became resolved to obtain an interview which, according to my remaining interlocutors, was crucial for any good research project on *Bhāmākalāpam*. I begged Ravi Balakrishna, Satyanarayana Sarma’s only direct disciple living in the village, to help me obtain an interview; he tried, but Satyanarayana Sarma resolutely refused. Frustrated, I left for Chennai to complete the rest of my fieldwork but returned to find Satyanarayana Sarma’s insistence upon silence unwavering. My interlocutors, particularly those dancers and instructors centered around the Siddhendra Kalakshetra where I was staying, knew of my frustrations and empathized with my situation. Yet no one was willing to intervene on my behalf. It was clear that Satyanarayana Sarma resided

at the peak of the power hierarchy within the brahmin performance community and was impervious to influence by anyone. Although I was finally able to get a formal interview with him in January 2011 during a return visit, the purpose of this vignette is to highlight his authoritative status within the Kuchipudi village. This status is directly tied to Satyanarayana Sarma's exceptional skills in the practice of impersonation, particularly his abilities in donning Satyabhama's *stri-vēṣam*.

Born on September 9, 1935, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma began learning dance at a very young age from his elder brother, Vedantam Prahlada Sarma. By the age of fourteen, he had learned most of Satyabhama's character in *Bhāmākalāpam* from his brother, but the elders of the village felt that he was not ready for public performance. According to a biographical article written by Modali Nagabhushana Sarma, one day when Satyanarayana Sarma was accompanying his uncle, Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, to a neighboring village, he felt that someone was following him. He looked back and saw a sage smiling at him; the sage then said to Satyanarayana Sarma, "You are worried, aren't you? You will have better opportunities in your nineteenth year and you will carry the Kuchipudi mantle far and wide" (Nagabhushana Sarma 2012, 11).

The sage's words soon proved to be true when Satyanarayana Sarma received the opportunity to perform the role of goddess Parvati in the dance drama *Uṣā-pariṇayam* in New Delhi in 1954. This performance earned him acclaim in the eyes of his elders, and he was given the chance to play the lead female character of Usha in *Uṣā-pariṇayam* the following year (Nagabhushana Sarma 2012, 11–12). Just as Satyanarayana Sarma was gaining recognition for his abilities in impersonation, the gurus of the Kuchipudi village decided to consolidate disparate performance groups (*mēlams*) into Venkatarama Natya Mandali, a troupe that gained prominence under the leadership of Chinta Krishna Murthy (1912–1969) (Nagabhushana Sarma 2016, 153). Krishna Murthy groomed Satyanarayana Sarma as the lead impersonator of his troupe, and together they performed extensively across South India, as well as on the national stage (Nagabhushana Sarma 2012, 12). Satyanarayana Sarma soon gained fame for his adeptness at impersonation and came to be known as "*kali yuga* Satyabhama" ("an incarnation of Satyabhama for our age") outside the village (15).

Notably, the height of Satyanarayana Sarma's career coincided with the classicization of Kuchipudi dance in the mid-twentieth century. As discussed in the previous chapter, following the creation of the state of Andhra Pradesh in 1956, Kuchipudi was catapulted onto the national stage and came to be recognized as *the* "classical" dance form of Telugu South India (Putcha 2013). Patronage by elite brahmin scholars coupled with state pride in Telugu arts positioned the exclusively brahmin male dance form of Kuchipudi as critical to the endeavors of the newly formed performing arts organization Andhra Pradesh Sangeet Natak Akademi (APSNA) (Jonnalagadda 2016, 1063). Integral to APSNA's efforts was the promotion of Kuchipudi dance outside of the village through public tours and

national radio recordings. In October 1960, for example, APSNA initiated a tour across South India led by Chinta Krishna Murthy and managed by Kuchipudi proponent Banda Kanakalingeshwara Rao (Nagabhushana Sarma 2016, 158–61). Performances featured Satyanarayana Sarma enacting the lead female characters in the dance dramas *Bhāmākalāpam* and *Uṣā-pariṇayam* (159). According to Jonnalagadda (2016, 1063–64), “this is one of the most successful tours of any Kuchipudi group till then as it earned the appreciation of the already renowned scholars and artistes of Tamil Nadu like, V. Raghavan, E. Krishna Iyer, Rukmini Devi Arundale, Indrani Rehman, Ramayya Pillai and others.”

Performances such as these propelled Satyanarayana Sarma into the spotlight, while also enabling the national recognition of Kuchipudi as a classical Indian dance form. Over the course of the mid-twentieth century, Satyanarayana Sarma’s exceptional skills of impersonation became symbolic of the Kuchipudi dance that emerged in postcolonial Andhra Pradesh. As testimony to his state and national recognition, Satyanarayana Sarma was the first Kuchipudi recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1961. He was later elected into the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship in 1967 and also received the prestigious national title of Padma Shri in 1970. This national fame soon shifted to global promotion; in 1986, he toured across the United States, Europe, and Russia, and descriptions of his performances are archived in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and even the conference notes of a program in Denmark.¹⁸ Satyanarayana Sarma’s numerous awards and international fame positioned him as the face of Kuchipudi classical dance in the mid-twentieth century. Beyond the Kuchipudi context, a national fascination with men impersonating women in the twentieth century, as evidenced by impersonators in Parsi, Gujarati, and Marathi theatre discussed in the previous chapter, further propelled Satyanarayana Sarma’s popularity.

When describing Satyanarayana Sarma’s skills of impersonation, Nagabhushana Sarma (2012, 8) states: “This exceptional performance skill challenging all the norms of credibility was the mainstay of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma’s virtuosity of impersonating women; a virtuosity that beguiles both men and women.” In a personal interview, Nagabhushana Sarma relayed to me that he has seen Satyanarayana Sarma perform *Bhāmākalāpam* at least fifty times since his childhood. He reported that during these performances, there was not a single time that he did not cry when Satyanarayana Sarma enacted the *lēkha* scene of *Bhāmākalāpam*, in which Satyabhama writes a letter to Krishna begging for his return. As Nagabhushana Sarma recalled:

Our experiences with Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma were very fine moments in our lives where we wept with him. When he finished his letter, there was no occasion when people did not weep . . . And so, I have seen him about fifty times. Fifty! In my younger days we had a craze for going and seeing Satyam’s *Bhāmākalāpam* wherever he performed. And he used to perform in a fifty-mile radius. He used to

perform almost once a week. I studied near Vijayawada, which is hardly twenty-five kilometers to Kuchipudi. And they used to perform in the villages. And whenever he did the letter, you were lost.

This praise of Satyanarayana Sarma's performance of Satyabhama is not unique, but rather reflective of a general tenor of admiration when discussing his particular skills of impersonation. Every Kuchipudi dancer I interviewed regarding the practice of impersonation invariably named Satyanarayana Sarma as the singular person capable of donning the *stri-vēṣam*.¹⁹ Further testimony to this national approbation is the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi archives in New Delhi, which hosts a sizeable collection of videos and photographs of Satyanarayana Sarma in *vēṣam*. In the eyes of the dancers and scholars who witnessed this legendary figure, Satyanarayana Sarma *is* Satyabhama.

Satyanarayana Sarma's other important performative skill is his reported ability to deceive his audiences by "passing" as a woman.²⁰ In an autobiographical article, Satyanarayana Sarma describes that once, while in the town of Nagpur, he performed the role of the young heroine Usha. When he went into the dressing room to change his costume between scenes, a wealthy patron entered and began making amorous advances. In order to return to the stage in time for his next scene, Satyanarayana Sarma had to reveal his identity to his prospective suitor, who was evidently unaware of Satyanarayana Sarma's skills in impersonation. Satyanarayana Sarma (1996, 86) described the moment: "[My suitor] felt embarrassed and returned to his seat after saying that had I really been a lady, he would have bequeathed his entire property to me, but unfortunately I happened to be male."²¹

As another example, Satyanarayana Sarma relates a story when he was staying in the house of a wealthy landowner in the Duvva village of the east Godavari district. During the performance, the landowner purchased a large garland and then gave it to Satyanarayana Sarma onstage while he was still in costume. The man's wife, who also appeared to have been unaware of Satyanarayana Sarma's impersonation, became upset that her husband had garlanded an unknown woman, and immediately left the performance. A fight erupted between the couple after they went home, and Satyanarayana Sarma (1996, 87) described the events that followed:

Meanwhile, I removed the make-up and went to see them. Their fight was almost reaching the climax when I explained to her that it was none other than me who played the role of Satyabhama and showed her the garland. She was shocked and went inside the house with an embarrassed look.

Satyanarayana Sarma undoubtedly delights in these stories of passing as a woman. He told me similar stories when I first met him in the summer of 2006 and again in December 2007. During both of these informal visits, he relayed the story of the

rich landlord in his dressing room, as well as an incident when the screenwriter for the 1967 film *Rahasyam* mistook him for a woman, even though he was dressed in male attire and cast to play the role of the male Hindu love god, Manmatha. In fact, Satyanarayana Sarma seems to be most comfortable before his audiences garbed in female attire. In a lecture demonstration at the Sangeet Natak Akademi's *Nrityotsava* festival in 1995, available in the New Delhi Sangeet Natak Akademi archives, Satyanarayana Sarma repeatedly refers to his "bald head" and male attire and indicates to the audience that he might look better in *strī-vēṣam* with flowers in his hair.

As evidenced by his repeated invocation of such accounts, Satyanarayana Sarma takes great pride in his ability not only to impersonate but to pass as a woman in offstage encounters. These moments of passing designate Satyanarayana Sarma as an impersonator capable of achieving a standard of realness, both on- and offstage. One can never be certain of the actual circumstances of the oral accounts, especially because Satyanarayana Sarma's skills in impersonation were likely known by many of the audience members who came to witness his performances during the height of his career. Nevertheless, Satyanarayana Sarma employs these incidents of passing to construct his own hagiography as *the* impersonator of the Kuchipudi village. The hagiographic quality of Satyanarayana Sarma's biography is also evident in the aforementioned narrative of the sage who appears earlier in his professional career and can be interpreted as a vision of Siddhendra himself. Like the *bhakti*-cization of Siddhendra's hagiography discussed in the previous chapter, Satyanarayana Sarma elevates his own life history from personal reflection to performative hagiography through these accounts of passing.

Satyanarayana Sarma's skills in impersonation have gained him critical acclaim in national dance circuits, as well as performative and financial status in the Kuchipudi village. As the most talented dancer in the performance practices that are the hallmark of the Kuchipudi brahmin male tradition, Satyanarayana Sarma wields performative power onstage. As the recipient of significant financial wealth from his nationally recognized dance skills, he exhibits financial and social power offstage. During my walks through the village, it was difficult to overlook Satyanarayana Sarma's towering multistoried home, which was extensively renovated before his death in 2012 (see below). There are several pieces of property in the Kuchipudi village in his name, including his house near the Ramalingeshvara temple, as well as buildings opposite the Siddhendra Kalakshetra (see Map 2 in the introduction). Satyanarayana Sarma's class status differs starkly from many of his counterparts in the village, who live by more modest means.

On November 17, 2012, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma passed away from a lung infection, and his death invoked mourning in the global Kuchipudi community. While he was an acclaimed Kuchipudi impersonator, Satyanarayana Sarma was not readily willing to impart the secret of his skills to the next generation of dancers. Despite the fact that all Kuchipudi brahmin men are bound by the vow

of donning the *strī-vēṣam*, only a select handful are successful at doing so, and even fewer are capable of imparting their skills to future generations. By leaving no one to carry forth his legacy, Satyanarayana Sarma retains his place as the most acclaimed Kuchipudi impersonator of the present day even after his death. As evident in the title of the 2012 documentary *I am Satyabhama*, Satyanarayana Sarma is, and perhaps will always be, Satyabhama.

APPROXIMATING THE NORM: FAILURES OF IMPERSONATION

Following in the footsteps of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma has proven to be a difficult task for the younger generation of village brahmins, particularly because the legendary dancer himself, as mentioned above, was reluctant to part with the secrets of his skills and trained only a handful of students through the course of his career. One dancer who has surmounted these odds and made a name for himself as an impersonator is Vedantam Venkata Naga Chalapathi Rao (aka Venku), described in the opening vignette of this chapter. Trained by his father Vedantam Rattayya Sarma and village guru Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma, Venku is a talented artist known for enacting both female and male roles. Like Satyanarayana Sarma, Venku has received national recognition for his performance skills and was the 2006 recipient of the prestigious Sangeet Natak Akademi's Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar Award. However, unlike his more famous predecessor, Venku's practices of impersonation have been subject to critique. For example, after Venku's performance of Satyabhama at the University of Hyderabad described and depicted earlier in this chapter, a few scholars and dance critics remarked that Venku's performance, albeit impressive, was too "masculine." I was surprised by these observations, especially given the enthusiasm of the audience around me when watching the performance. In her review of the performance for the arts magazine *Nartanam*, dance critic Madhavi Puranam (2011b, 83) underscored this sentiment:

The Bhamakalapam performance in the classical Kuchipudi tradition by Vedantam Venkatanagachalapathi Rao was neat and virtuous but the dancer could not attain finesse in impersonating Satyabhama, as he veered to more masculine mannerisms, exaggerated vigorous footwork and torso movements in dance playing to the gallery.

When I relayed some of these impressions to Venku in the days following the performance, he insightfully remarked that when enacting Satyabhama, he was not attempting to replicate the expressive techniques of Satyanarayana Sarma, but rather trying to do something different and, therefore, should not be limited to the boundaries of his legendary predecessor. Venku also stated that he was performing *Bhāmākalāpam* in the style (*bāṇi*) of his guru Pasumarti Rattayya Sarma, which

requires more vigorous foot movements in comparison to the style usually performed by Satyanarayana Sarma.

While Venku may not have been trying to replicate Satyanarayana Sarma's practices of impersonation, it is clear that some members of the audience, particularly those familiar with Kuchipudi dance, expected him to do so. By incorporating ostensibly "masculine" (i.e., vigorous) footwork into his performance of *Bhāmākalāpam*, Venku departed from the impersonation techniques established by Satyanarayana Sarma. Venku's enactment of Satyabhama resonates with the failed performance of the oral epic *Candaini* as discussed by Joyce Flueckiger (1988). When analyzing a regional performance of *Candaini* in the Chhattisgarh town of Dhamtari, Flueckiger describes how the lead performer Devlal failed to meet audience expectations, resulting in a mass exodus of audience members halfway through the performance. Audience members later attributed the failure in performance to Devlal's lack of *vēṣam* on stage: "He should have worn a sari" (163).²² Failure, nonetheless, can still tell us something valuable about the performance context, and according to Flueckiger: "analysis of the 'failure' reveals an innovative, nontraditional performance setting that elicited contradictory expectations on the part of the performers, patrons, and various groups within the audience—expectations which could not all be fulfilled" (159). Similar to Devlal's failed performance of *Candaini*, the critiques of Venku in *strī-vēṣam* reveal the underlying expectations of the Kuchipudi community: in order to enact Satyabhama successfully, one must replicate the performance style of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma. In other words, when donning the *strī-vēṣam*, the Kuchipudi brahmin man must successfully impersonate Satyanarayana Sarma impersonating Satyabhama. Venku's failure to impersonate Satyabhama in the manner of his famous predecessor thus positions Satyanarayana Sarma as the ideal impersonator of the Kuchipudi village, one who is ultimately impossible for any other performer to emulate.

Male dancers from the Kuchipudi village are not the only ones incapable of following in Satyanarayana Sarma's footsteps. Female Kuchipudi dancers from outside the Kuchipudi village also fail to approximate Satyanarayana Sarma's standard of impersonation. Dance scholar Jivan Pani (1977, 38) underscores this point:

Leave aside [Satyanarayana Sarma's] exquisite dance-movements, if he merely walks on the stage as Satyabhama, the sensuousness, delicacy and grace of gait delight the eyes and remains as an experience for life. There are now many female *Kuchipudi* dancers. None equals [Satyanarayana Sarma]; at least the many I have seen. At best they appear to be imitating him. Does he imitate any particular woman? Perhaps none except Satyabhama, who is not an historical person, but a myth; a symbol.

Satyanarayana Sarma thus outperforms female dancers who find themselves in the position of imitating the impersonator to perform Satyabhama, a character whose name literally translates as "True Woman."

Paradoxically, Satyanarayana Sarma himself could never fully embody the norm he created. While he continued to impersonate well into his sixties and seventies, these later performances failed to capture audiences' attention in the manner of those staged during the height of his career.²³ The lasting impression of Satyanarayana Sarma's skills in donning the *strī-vēṣam*, however, remained, and he continued to be invited to impersonate both within and outside the Kuchipudi village, despite the availability of younger impersonators such as Venku.²⁴ Satyanarayana Sarma's death in 2012 entrenched his authoritative status in the Kuchipudi village and rendered true the claim that "gender norms are finally phantasmatic, impossible to embody" (Butler [1990] 2008, 192). Even after his death, Satyanarayana Sarma continues to be the norm for impersonating Satyabhama, thereby positioning him as the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity for the Kuchipudi village.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES: A LOCAL APPROACH

Raewyn Connell, one of the pioneering scholars of masculinity studies, defines the term "hegemonic masculinity" as the form of masculinity that legitimates hierarchal relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among various forms of masculinities (1987, 183–90).²⁵ In response to later challenges to this theory, Connell and her colleague James W. Messerschmidt (2005, 849) call for an expansion of the notion of hegemonic masculinity to account for outstanding gaps, including recognizing the plural geographies shaped by three organizing locations: (1) local (constructed in arenas involving face-to-face interactions of families, organizations, and immediate communities); (2) regional (constructed at the level of culture or nation-state); and (3) global (constructed in transnational arenas involving transnational world politics, business, and media).²⁶ Multiple, interlinking, and even conflicting forms of hegemonic masculinities exist across all three levels, countering the assumption of a hierarchal flow of power from global to regional to local.

Connell and Messerschmidt's distinctions of hegemonic masculinities are important for highlighting the nuance of masculinities and power across spatial locations. However, we must be wary of conflating hegemonic masculinity with global conceptions of hypermasculinity or machismo. In his discussion of South Asian American basketball leagues, Stanley I. Thangaraj (2015, 14) describes the call to "man up" and "be a beast" on the American basketball court, where "manning up" is a process of engaging with mainstream dictates of masculinities mixed in with South Asian American experiences of emasculation." Masculinity conveyed through toned musculature and athletic skill on the basketball court characterizes the process of "manning up" for Thangaraj's South Asian American interlocutors (14). In a similar vein, Jasbir Puar (2007, 181) describes the dialectal

images of the turbaned Sikh man in the American diaspora: “the turbaned man is the warrior leader of the community, the violent patriarch, and at the same time, the long-haired feminized sissy, a figure of failed masculinity in contrast to (white) hegemonic masculinities.”²⁷ The range of South Asian American masculinities as expressing effeminacy, hypermasculinity, and even terror recapitulate Orientalist logics of colonial masculinities in South Asia, which alternate between effeminate and martial visions of masculinity (Sinha 1995).

The dialectical stereotypes of the hypermasculine terrorist versus the effeminate “model minority” limit the scope of hegemonic masculinity by eclipsing the everyday realities and flows of power for South Asian and South Asian American men. Marcia C. Inhorn (2012, 45) notes a similar limitation to the concept of hegemonic masculinity in her ethnographic study of infertility among Arab men:

While the theory is designed to account for masculine relationality, as well as fluid and shifting power between men, its ethnographic applications often seem to reify specific masculinities as static manly types, which hold particular positions within a set social hierarchy. Namely, the pigeonholing of ethnographic participants as examples of “hegemonic” or “subordinated” males casts them as static subjects and serves to solidify the types themselves. This obscures the lived reality of different forms of masculinity as *ever-changing social strategies* enacted through practice. [Emphasis in original]

Inhorn addresses the limitations of hegemonic masculinity by introducing the concept of emergent masculinities, a term that points to the myriad processes that men must navigate when adapting to social changes in the world around them (60).

In the Kuchipudi village, hegemonic masculinity also takes on a uniquely local form. Village brahmin men are, for the most part, unconcerned with global (and primarily American) conceptions of hegemonic masculinity, as evident from the embodied techniques of impersonation surveyed in this chapter.²⁸ Instead of sporting muscular chests and bulging biceps, like the basketball players of Thangaraj’s study, Kuchipudi brahmin men cultivate an ideal conception of womanhood through their male bodies. The threat of effeminacy becomes apparent only when impersonation moves from the village to urban and transnational spaces (see chapter 4). Within the context of the village, effeminacy is secondary to formulations of hegemonic masculinity achievable only through the donning of the *strī-vēṣam*. The myriad expressions of masculinity are also ever-changing, or *emergent* in the words of Inhorn (2012), particularly as the newer generation of impersonators inherit the mantle of their predecessors. In this vein, one can delineate hegemonic masculinity as achieved by Satyanarayana Sarma from the emergent forms of masculinity expressed by younger brahmin dancers. This latter group adheres to standards of what I refer to here as *normative masculinity*—the processual or emergent form of hegemonic masculinity that is never fully actualized. Constrained by norms of caste, gender, and community, younger brahmin men like Venku regulate

their staged performances and quotidian practices through a standard of normative masculinity that is always in process but never fully hegemonic. Through their continuous attempts and failures in impersonation, Venku and his counterparts express the impossibility of hegemonic masculinity, thus foreshadowing the concept of constructed artifice (*māyā*) discussed in the next chapter.

To understand the formulations of hegemonic masculinity, it is useful to outline three overarching norms of gender and caste in the Kuchipudi village, underscored here in italics. At the most basic level, impersonation is a normative practice in the Kuchipudi village: *the norm in the Kuchipudi village is to see the brahmin male body performing a woman's guise*. Moreover, because all brahmin men from the Kuchipudi village are bound by the prescriptive code of donning Satyabhama's guise, this portrayal works to create their normative gender and caste identities. In other words, *to achieve hegemonic masculinity in the Kuchipudi village, a brahmin man must impersonate*. Impersonation onstage spills into personation offstage as Kuchipudi brahmin men don a woman's guise in the context of performance in order to articulate their gender and caste status in everyday life (Mankekar 2015).

The norms of Kuchipudi village performance, however, do not affect brahmin male performers alone. As evidenced by the embodied techniques of impersonation—costume (*āhārya*), speech (*vācika*), and gait (*āṅgika*)—Kuchipudi impersonators observe women's bodies in their everyday lives and alter their physical appearance to approximate an idealized image of womanhood onstage. The underlying paradox of these embodied practices is that while Kuchipudi brahmin men can impersonate “real” women onstage, Kuchipudi brahmin women are excluded from performance altogether. Kuchipudi female dancers outside the village who have begun to dance in recent decades are also deemed incomparable to Satyanarayana Sarma's stalwart skills of gender guising (Pani 1977). The practice of impersonation in the Kuchipudi village stands in contrast to the ritual guising practices of the Gangamma *jātara*, in which ultimate reality is envisioned as female through the ritual *vēṣams* of the goddess (Handelman 1995; Flueckiger 2013). In comparison to the Gangamma *jātara*, which puts forth a female-centered world and challenges aggressive masculinity (Flueckiger 2013, 73), brahmin masculinity constructed through impersonation in the Kuchipudi village produces the ultimate form of authority.

This leads to the final and perhaps most significant norm of the Kuchipudi village: *Kuchipudi brahmin men assert that they can perform a woman's guise better than women themselves* (Hansen 1999, 140). This norm suggests that impersonation is not simply a performance tradition, but also a practice of power that shapes the gender and caste identities of the brahmin men *and* women of the village. By donning Satyabhama's guise to fulfill the prescription made by their founding saint, Kuchipudi brahmin men approximate their gender and caste norms in order to assert their power as the “cultural brokers” (Hancock 1999, 64) of Kuchipudi tradition (*sāmpradāyam*).

Impersonation is an authoritative practice of exclusion that lays the groundwork for hegemonic masculinity: to be a Kuchipudi brahmin man, one must impersonate, and, conversely, to impersonate, one must be a Kuchipudi brahmin man. The paradigmatic example of hegemonic masculinity is Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, a brahmin man with performative authority onstage and class status offstage. Satyanarayana Sarma epitomizes Connell's (1987, 183–90) earlier definition of hegemonic masculinity, which legitimates hierarchal relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among various forms of masculinities. When Satyanarayana Sarma becomes Satyabhama, he is not simply donning a woman's guise, but also asserting his authority to do so. For Satyanarayana Sarma, the line "I am Satyabhama" in Satyabhama's introductory song is a performative utterance of power that articulates the contours of hegemonic masculinity in both performative and quotidian contexts. However, with the death of Satyanarayana Sarma and the rise of a younger generation of performers like Venku, the ideal of hegemonic masculinity in the Kuchipudi village is increasingly reframed and perhaps ultimately unachievable. As I explore in the chapters to come, hegemonic brahmin masculinity unravels entirely the farther away we move from the village's exclusive brahmin community.

. . .

The brahmin enclave of the Kuchipudi village is not simply a cluster of upper-caste homes situated along unpaved streets, but also an imaginative space in which gender, caste, and performance intersect to create normative ideals for Kuchipudi brahmin men. In her research on colonial conceptions of brahmin masculinity, Mrinalini Sinha (1995, 11) draws attention to the intersections of caste and gender by suggesting that "since the experience of gender itself is deeply implicated in other categories such as caste/class, race, nation, and sexuality, an exclusive focus on gender can never be adequate for a feminist historiography."²⁹ This chapter builds upon Sinha's attention to gender within a broader matrix of categories such as class and caste by analyzing not only the corporeal theatrics of brahmin male performance, but also how gender and caste norms are constructed and reimagined through the body of the impersonator.

The practice of impersonation is crucial for understanding the construction of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the Kuchipudi village. By wearing elaborate costumes or modulating the pitch of their voices, Kuchipudi brahmin men are not simply donning Satyabhama's *strī-vēṣam*, they are also articulating their gender and caste identities by fulfilling the vow made to their founding saint Siddhendra. The class and caste status of brahmin male dancers such as Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma reveal the integral role of impersonation in the fabric of Kuchipudi village life. The case of Satyanarayana Sarma also illustrates the technologies of power of the Kuchipudi village, in which the embodied practices of a single brahmin impersonator create and sustain norms of gender, caste, and community. Yet, failures

in impersonation define the limits of hegemonic masculinity and enable us to delineate normative masculinity as emergent, always in process but never fully complete. As this chapter demonstrates, gender impersonation in the Kuchipudi village is *not* gender trouble (Butler [1990] 2008); rather, gender impersonation is the means by which brahmin men exert power and craft hegemonic masculinity onstage and in their everyday lives.