

## *Bhāmākalāpam* beyond the Village

### *Transgressing Norms of Gender and Sexuality in Urban and Transnational Kuchipudi Dance*

Today, Kuchipudi is an Indian dance form practiced across transnational contexts, spanning from Australia to Paris to the United States. Kuchipudi's transnational reach is attributed to a single figure from the mid-twentieth century: Vempati Chinna Satyam (1929–2012). A brahmin from the Kuchipudi village, Chinna Satyam left his hometown in the late 1940s to move to the Tamil-speaking urban center of Madras (present-day Chennai), where he would soon establish the Kuchipudi Art Academy (hereafter KAA), an institution referred to as the “Mecca for all aspirants who wanted to learn Kuchipudi” (Nagabhushana Sarma 2004, 7).<sup>1</sup> Paralleling the ostensible “revival” of Bharatanatyam a few decades beforehand (Allen 1997), Chinna Satyam began to experiment, innovate, and reimagine Kuchipudi from an insulated dance style solely performed by village brahmin men to a transnationally recognized “classical” Indian dance form.

Chinna Satyam's experiments with Kuchipudi abandoned many key elements of the dance form as it was practiced in his natal village: he began to teach both women and men from a variety of caste backgrounds; he choreographed elaborate dance dramas featuring both mythological and social themes; and, most significant for this study, he eliminated the practice of male dancers donning the *strī-vēṣam*. There is an extensive body of literature about Chinna Satyam's various innovations with performance and pedagogy by practitioners and scholars of Kuchipudi (Pattabhi Raman 1988/89; Andavalli and Pemmaraju 1994; Jonnalagadda 1996b; Nagabhushana Sarma 2004; Bhikshu 2006; Chinna Satyam 2012). However, these discussions are, for the most part, silent on Chinna Satyam's experiments with impersonation, particularly as it pertains to Siddhendra's *Bhāmākalāpam* and the character of Madhavi.<sup>2</sup> In his rechoreographed version of *Bhāmākalāpam*

(ca. 1970s), Chinna Satyam entirely transformed the gender composition of the dance drama by recasting the roles of Satyabhama *and* Krishna to be enacted by female dancers and by altering Madhavi to a gender-variant character enacted by a male performer.<sup>3</sup> Chinna Satyam's decisions regarding *Bhāmākalāpam* are certainly pragmatic insofar as they arise from the demands he faced to craft choreography legible to both non-Telugu-speaking performers and non-Telugu-speaking audience members. However, the implications of his *Bhāmākalāpam* are far more transgressive than scholars and practitioners of Kuchipudi dance readily admit. Chinna Satyam countered the village's caste and gender norms, particularly Siddhendra's long-standing prescription to impersonate, by casting a woman to portray Satyabhama and by introducing gender ambiguity on the Kuchipudi stage, a decision that ultimately subjected him to critique by his village counterparts.

Focusing on Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* staged in the cities of Madras in 1981 and Atlanta in 2011, this chapter traces the transformations of Kuchipudi dance across a number of distinct performative and lived spaces: village to urban to transnational, male to female to gender-variant, brahmin to nonbrahmin, normative to queer. I juxtapose Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, which includes both female and male performers from various caste backgrounds, alongside the traditional version of *Bhāmākalāpam* presented in the village, in which all performers are hereditary brahmin men. While the previous chapters have envisioned village performance practices, particularly donning the *strī-vēṣam*, as upholding normative views on gender, caste, and sexuality, this chapter explores the disruptive possibilities of urban and transnational Kuchipudi dance, in which broader discourses on gender and sexuality call into question the utility of the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam*.

I signal the expansiveness of Chinna Satyam's experiments with Kuchipudi by referring to his style as both an urban and transnational dance form. After establishing the KAA in 1963, Chinna Satyam fashioned an urban dance style colloquially referred to as "Madras Kuchipudi" (Thota 2016, 140). By the 1980s, Chinna Satyam and his students increasingly began performing across global contexts, including North America and Europe. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Chinna Satyam and students of the KAA toured the United States every few years, performing a compilation of his dance dramas for South Asian American audiences. Today, particularly through online platforms such as Skype and YouTube, Chinna Satyam's choreography truly exists across transnational spaces. For example, during one of my return visits to the KAA, I watched Chinna Satyam's son, Vempati Ravi Shankar, teach a Skype lesson to a student in Australia after he had spent the day training a dancer visiting from Paris.

In referring to Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi as both urban *and* transnational, I take a cue from Priya Srinivasan's *Sweating Saris* (2012), which makes a case for envisioning Indian dance as a form of transnational labor. I also recognize the

importance of Sitara Thobani's (2017, 24–25) claim that the production of Indian classical dance was, at the very outset, a transcultural affair that must be envisioned as “always already global,” articulated at the “contact zone” between Indian nationalism and colonial imperialism. Like my interlocutors, I distinguish between Kuchipudi village performance, which is exclusively enacted (and controlled) by the village's brahmin male community, and Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi, which was first performed at the KAA and now extends across transnational spaces. Nevertheless, I recognize the exchanges across these seemingly distinct geographical sites of dance production. Today, the Kuchipudi village is inextricable from Chinna Satyam's style of Kuchipudi, a point to which I return in the conclusion of this study.

In moving from village *agrahāram* performance to urban and transnational Kuchipudi dance, I am indebted to the extensive scholarship of Anuradha Jonnalagadda (1996b, 2004, 2012, 2016), whose research traces the transformation of Kuchipudi dance under Chinna Satyam's tutelage. Notably, I do not discuss the impacts of the South Indian film industry on cosmopolitan Kuchipudi dance, a point that is documented in the works of Rumya Putcha (2011) and Katyayani Thota (2016).<sup>4</sup> Rather, my attention in this chapter is limited to Chinna Satyam's experiments with *Bhāmākalāpam* to consider what happens to the practice of impersonation and the ensuing construction of brahmin masculinity as Kuchipudi moves beyond the village and its circumscribed brahmin community to the urban and transnational stage. Drawing on the language of Gayatri Gopinath (2005) and E. Patrick Johnson (2001), I envision Chinna Satyam's urban and transnational form of Kuchipudi as a site of queer diaspora that exposes the heteronormative anxieties undergirding Kuchipudi village life. By dislodging impersonation from the purview of the brahmin male body, Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* engenders the capaciousness of *vēṣam*, a practice that holds the power to simultaneously subvert and re-signify hegemonic norms.

#### VEMPATI CHINNA SATYAM: EXPERIMENTS WITH *BHĀMĀKALĀPAM*

Born on October 15, 1929, to a hereditary Kuchipudi brahmin family, Vempati Chinna Satyam began his dance training with village guru Tadepalli Perayya Sastry. At the age of eighteen, he left the confines of his natal village to travel to Madras and join his elder cousin, Vempati Pedda Satyam, who was already working in the city's burgeoning cinema industry (Thota 2016, 137). Chinna Satyam worked with Pedda Satyam and Vedantam Raghavayya, another relative from the Kuchipudi village, to choreograph dance sequences for South Indian films (Nagabhushana Sarma 2004, 7). Chinna Satyam soon began learning from Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry, the well-known exponent of solo Kuchipudi dance who, as mentioned in the introduction, interacted with and adapted

from *devadāsī* performers (Chinna Satyam 2002, 28; Putcha 2015, 12–13).<sup>5</sup> Then, in 1963, Chinna Satyam started his own school, the Kuchipudi Art Academy (KAA) (Nagabhushana Sarma 2004, 7). Paralleling the institutionalization of Bharatanatyam through Rukmini Arundale's Kalakshetra, Chinna Satyam's KAA became the locus for a veritable Kuchipudi empire in the decades to come. By 1986, Chinna Satyam inaugurated Kuchipudi's global presence with a tour of the United States, along with Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma (Nagabhushana Sarma 2012, 18). Such tours abroad, now a staple for Kuchipudi dancers based in India, can be viewed as examples of transnational labor characteristic of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Indian dance (Srinivasan 2012).

Chinna Satyam's particular brand of Kuchipudi that developed from the 1960s onwards can best be characterized under the rubric of *heteroglossia*. Citing Mikhail Bakhtin (1981), Indian dance scholar Ketu Katrak (2011, 14) defines heteroglossia as follows:

[Heteroglossia] asserts multiplicity over unitary meanings . . . Heteroglossia also includes "multiple social discourses" that include varying ideological and class positions. Bakhtin's notion of language as inherently hybrid enables layers of meaning generated in the interaction between text and reader, or speaker and listener, and I would add, of performer and audience.

In a similar vein, Chinna Satyam worked to adapt Kuchipudi to the heteroglossia of a cosmopolitan context: his style of Kuchipudi is attentive to a multiplicity of spaces (village, urban, and transnational), linguistic registers (Telugu, Tamil, and Sanskrit), and movement vocabularies (traditional and contemporary).<sup>6</sup> In the early years of the KAA, it is likely that Chinna Satyam's cosmopolitan audiences were deeply familiar with Indian dance movements (through Bharatanatyam) and Telugu language (through Karnatak music). Nevertheless, Chinna Satyam was still faced with the challenge of "modernizing" village Kuchipudi for a cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibility, a point that is readily apparent in the title of N. Pattabhi Raman's article, "Dr. Vempati Chinna Satyam: Modernizer of a Tacky Dance Tradition" (1988/89), published in the popular dance magazine *Sruti*. Chinna Satyam molded Kuchipudi to appeal to a cosmopolitan context of heteroglossia, particularly through his "modern" dance dramas, a genre that builds on yet differs from the *kalāpas* and *yakṣagānas* performed by the village's brahmin dance community (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 137–43; Putcha 2015, 10).

The first example of such a dance drama is *Sri Krishna Parijatam*, which Chinna Satyam adapted to the Kuchipudi stage in 1959. The eponymous play, which was wildly popular in Telugu theatre in the early twentieth century, is based on the Telugu retelling of Krishna's theft of the *pārijāta* tree from the garden of Indra, the king of the gods, for his wife Satyabhama.<sup>7</sup> Chinna Satyama's *Sri Krishna Parijatam* integrated the plot of the stage play along with several pieces from the village

*Bhāmākalāpam* dance drama, which were choreographed in line with his uniquely cosmopolitan aesthetic. With the help of scriptwriter S.V. Bhujangaraya Sarma and Karnatak music aficionado Patrayani Sangeetha Rao, Chinna Satyam choreographed several other dance dramas, including those focusing on social themes, such as a Kuchipudi reworking of Rabindranath Tagore's play *Chandalika* (Chinna Satyam 2012, 38–39).<sup>8</sup> Chinna Satyam's proclivity for experimentation is apparent throughout his repertoire, which makes use of theatrical lighting, stage décor, and sets, as well as showcasing different methods of technique and presentation (Bhikshu 2006, 260–62). Chinna Satyam's productions are palpably distinct from the long-standing performances of the Kuchipudi village, which are typically enacted on an outdoor stage without the aid of elaborate sets, stage props, or lighting. Through Chinna Satyam, Kuchipudi dance became firmly entrenched on the proscenium stage or, perhaps more accurately, in the Chennai *sabha* (Rudisill 2007, 2012).<sup>9</sup>

Chinna Satyam's innovations of Kuchipudi dance were not only restricted to the genre of “modern” dance dramas, but also touched upon elements from the pre-established repertoire of *kalāpas*, namely *Bhāmākalāpam* attributed to Siddhendra. Although it is difficult to ascertain the exact date, Chinna Satyam set out to rechoreograph *Bhāmākalāpam* in the 1970s, likely following the success of his dance drama *Sri Krishna Parijatam* mentioned above.<sup>10</sup> Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, which adapts wholesale pieces from his earlier dance drama *Sri Krishna Parijatam*, is a loosely construed amalgamation of the village's traditional *Bhāmākalāpam* interspersed with innovative elements of his distinctively “modern” repertoire. Abandoning the long-standing practice of brahmin men in *strī-vēṣam*, Chinna Satyam, who at the time was teaching a great number of female students, cast nonbrahmin and brahmin women to enact Satyabhama and Krishna, respectively. Most notably, he rechoreographed Madhavi into a gender-variant character who is performed “neither as a woman nor as a man” (Jonnalagadda 1996b, 138).

Building on the analysis of village *Bhāmākalāpam* performance in chapter 3, here I focus on Chinna Satyam's experiments with *Bhāmākalāpam* in urban and transnational Kuchipudi dance. I draw on the following source material: (1) Vempati Chinna Satyam's handwritten script of *Bhāmākalāpam*; (2) a 1981 video of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* staged in Madras and directed by Chinna Satyam himself; and (3) a production of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* directed by his student Sasikala Penumarthy at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, in September 2011.<sup>11</sup> While most of the images included in this chapter come from the 2011 performance of *Bhāmākalāpam*, it is Chinna Satyam's 1981 video recording that provides the most compelling evidence for the radical nature of his choreographic interventions, particularly in the case of Madhavi. I also incorporate interviews with Kuchipudi performers trained in Chinna Satyam's KAA, including Chinna Satyam's son, Vempati Ravi Shankar, and his daughter, Chavali Balatripurasundari, both of whom became close contacts during my time in India and in the years following. Chinna Satyam himself, who passed away two years

after my fieldwork, was present during my time at the KAA, but advanced in age and not able to give sustained interviews.<sup>12</sup> Finally, my own embodied experiences of learning Kuchipudi dance under Chinna Satyam's student, Sasikala Penumarthi, for the last twenty years and performing the role of Krishna in the 2011 performance of *Bhāmākalāpam* in Atlanta inform my discussion. Although I do not directly employ the reflexive methodology of auto-ethnography (Adams and Holman Jones 2008, 375), my experiences of learning to dance and perform the roles of Satyabhama and Krishna invariably leak into my analysis in this chapter.

### SATYABHAMA

One of the most notable innovations of Chinna Satyam's KAA was the introduction and institutionalization of women into Kuchipudi dance. When establishing the KAA in 1963, Chinna Satyam followed the trend begun by his guru Vedantam Lakshminarayana Sastry and opened the doors of his institution to women, an act that must have been viewed as radical to the circumscribed community of brahmin men he left behind in the village. Attracting middle- and upper-class women, particularly those already versed in the movement vocabulary of Indian dance and/or trained to perform in South Indian films, Chinna Satyam soon amassed a contingent of female students, such as the actress Hema Malini and dancers Sobha Naidu and Manju Bhargavi (Kothari and Pasricha 2001, 205).<sup>13</sup> In fact, there were so many female students learning at the KAA that Chinna Satyam was often bereft of male dancers to play lead characters in his dance dramas (Venkataraman 2012, 77). Occasionally, Chinna Satyam imported male dancers from the Kuchipudi village, and a handful of village dancers have played supporting male roles in the academy's dance drama productions, including Vedantam Rattayya Sarma, the father of Venku, the impersonator described in chapter 2. More often, however, Chinna Satyam cast female dancers to play both female *and* male roles and, in the case of *Bhāmākalāpam*, the characters of Satyabhama and Krishna are both played by women (see Figures 15 and 20).

Apart from Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma in the Kuchipudi village, the single name that has become synonymous with Satyabhama's role in *Bhāmākalāpam* is Sobha Naidu. A senior nonbrahmin disciple of Chinna Satyam's since 1969, Sobha Naidu gained a reputation for performing the lead characters in KAA's productions, particularly the role of Satyabhama in the dance dramas *Bhāmākalāpam* and *Sri Krishna Parijatam*.<sup>14</sup> When describing her experience portraying this character, Naidu states:

Right from my childhood, my fascination for Satyabhama continued. The impact of the programme *Srikrishna Parijatam* was so much on me that I decided to join the Academy on the very next day. After a few years of training, I got the opportunity to portray this wonderful character . . . When it comes to performance, I start feeling





FIGURE 15. Sasikala Penumarthi enacts Satyabhama. Photo by Uzma Ansari.

that I am Satyabhama, when I sit to start getting ready. Once I enter the stage I forget my identity and try to put my heart and soul into the character.<sup>15</sup>

Naidu goes on to distinguish her performance of Satyabhama from the brahmin impersonators from the village, who must put in an “extra effort” to enact the character:

When male dancers portray the character of Satyabhama, they have to certainly put extra effort in the sense they should take special care and every minute they should be conscious of what they are doing. Otherwise it might create an odd impact on viewers. The art lovers have a particular image of the character. If the artist is a woman, whether she does full justice or not, if she puts her own efforts, it would leave an impact on the audience. But if it is the male artist doing any female character, he has to put extra effort and at the same time should be conscious of his every movement lest it would spoil the image of the character.<sup>16</sup>

When I spoke with Venku, a younger brahmin from the village known for his skills in impersonation, he explicitly downplayed the enactment of Satyabhama by a female dancer:

Satyabhama is a female character. If a woman does a female character, there's nothing there . . . There's no greatness there. A man doing a female role is great. Like that, a female doing a male role is great . . . It's good if a man does a female role or if a woman does a male role. That's because there's a difference there. If a woman normally does a female role, what is the big difference? There's nothing.

While Venku's statements are certainly contentious and arise from his particular standpoint as an aspiring impersonator, they do hint at one important impact of Chinna Satyam's KAA: the noticeable lack of the brahmin male body in Satyabhama's *vēṣam*. The unequal gender ratio of female to male dancers, which prompted Chinna Satyam's casting of women to enact female characters like Satyabhama, rendered moot the long-established practice of impersonation in the village. As Vijayawada-based impersonator Ajay Kumar succinctly remarked to me, “There is no need for men to dance as women when women are dancing themselves.” The absence of the brahmin man in *strī-vēṣam* distinguishes Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* from village *Bhāmākalāpam* performances. Chinna Satyam's rechoreographed Satyabhama, enacted by a female dancer, must also be positioned alongside his gender-variant rendering of Madhavi.

#### SŪTRADHĀRA/MADHAVI/MADHAVA

To understand the radical nature of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, we must look beyond Satyabhama to the characters of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava, which are





FIGURE 16. Vedantam Raghava as the *sūtradhāra*. Photo by Uzma Ansari.

uniquely different from village performances. Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* opens in a manner similar to Kuchipudi village performances as the *sūtradhāra*, played by a male dancer, comes onstage to announce the commencement of the drama. The *sūtradhāra* is dressed like his village counterpart, wearing a turban on his head, an upper cloth to cover his bare chest, and a stitched silk costume below the waist (see Figure 16). Along with two female accompanying dancers, the *sūtradhāra* performs benedictory prayers, stage consecration, and description of Satyabhama's braid, known as the *jaḍa vṛtāntam* (lit., "story of the braid") (Kapaleswara Rao 1996).<sup>17</sup> After this introduction, the *sūtradhāra*, along with the two dancers, exits the stage and does *not* reappear throughout the course of the drama. The *sūtradhāra*'s role as the "one who holds the strings" through playing the cymbals (*naṭṭuvāṅgam*) is modified in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* and, in the case of the 1981 recording, Chinna Satyam played the *naṭṭuvāṅgam* himself. By downplaying the *sūtradhāra*'s onstage presence, Chinna Satyam positions Madhavi (as opposed to the *sūtradhāra* or Madhava) as centrally important to his *Bhāmākalāpam*.

When Satyabhama finishes her character introduction and calls out to her confidante, the performer cast as the *sūtradhāra* returns onstage with his costume significantly altered to portray Madhavi. The dancer enacting Madhavi is dressed in a long shawl covering his bare chest in the manner of the upper part of a woman's sari. Below his waist, he either wears a stitched silk costume (as pictured in Figure 17) or sometimes the bottom part of a sari, which is wrapped through the legs



FIGURE 17. Madhavi (left) and Satyabhama (right). Photo by Uzma Ansari.

in what appears to be a Vaishnava style of dress.<sup>18</sup> Finally, and perhaps most distinctively, the male performer wears a wig of black hair adorned with flowers. At the end of the dance drama, when Madhava approaches Krishna, the performer changes once again back into the male costume initially worn by the *sūtradhāra* at the beginning of the drama. Thus, *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava are distinguished through changes in sartorial appearance. When the male performer wears flowers in his hair, the audience recognizes his enactment of the female character Madhavi; when the performer wears a turban, the audience recognizes the male roles of the *sūtradhāra* or Madhava.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to these alterations in costume, there are significant changes in bodily movement, particularly with respect to Madhavi's character. In both the 1981 recording and the 2011 performance of *Bhāmākalāpam*, the male performer enacting Madhavi moves with a "feminine" gait (*āṅgika*), particularly through exaggerated hand gestures and a swaying of the hips. The same male performer does not employ such movements when enacting the *sūtradhāra* or Madhava in other parts of the dance drama. This bodily comportment contrasts with the village enactments of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava, in which the movements (*āṅgika*) are gendered masculine for all three characters.

This distinction in bodily movement is most evident during the scene in which Madhavi asks Satyabhama for her nose ring. After Madhavi demands the nose ring, Satyabhama attempts to appease Madhavi by bringing her jewelry box and decorating her friend with a number of her own ornaments, including her bangles, waist belt, and anklets, while Madhavi looks into a mirror approvingly. Although adorned with Satyabhama's jewels, Madhavi is still dissatisfied and forces Satyabhama to give up her own nose ring. Satyabhama reluctantly removes her nose ring, touches it to her eyes in a gesture of respect, and gives it to Madhavi. Finally in possession of her prize, Madhavi dramatically casts off her own nose ring and mimetically adorns herself with Satyabhama's new one (see Figure 18).

Madhavi's mimetic donning of Satyabhama's nose ring and other ornaments is a feature noticeably absent in village performances of *Bhāmākalāpam*. In village *Bhāmākalāpam* performances, while Madhavi might *ask* for Satyabhama's ornaments, including her nose ring, she never *wears* the jewels. Instead, she takes them by hand, thereby reasserting the disconnect between the performer's external gender performance and the character's presumed gender identity. In Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, by comparison, Satyabhama carefully dresses Madhavi with her ornaments, while the musicians repeat the verse, *Vāda mēla pōve* ("Go and get my lord"). Through each repetition of the line, the embodied movements of both performers situate Madhavi as a female-identified character. Here, I use the language of female-identified and male-identified to indicate the overtly constructed nature of the performance of *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava. For ease of reading, I do not use similar terminology to discuss other characters of *Bhāmākalāpam*, but such language could be employed in all cases. For example, a male dancer donning the



FIGURE 18. Madhavi wears Satyabhama's nose ring. Photo by Uzma Ansari.

*strī-vēṣam* is performing a female-identified character in the same manner that a female dancer donning Satyabhama's guise is also performing a female-identified character.

Notably, Madhavi's bodily movements contrast with the character's dialogues, which are voiced by a male vocalist. One of Chinna Satyam's innovations was to excise verbal dialogues delivered by the characters onstage. Rather than having



the performers stand in front of a microphone and deliver the dialogues themselves, the vocalists in the orchestra (seated on the far end of stage right), sing the dialogues into a microphone (accompanied by music), while the dancers onstage lip-synch these dialogues. Stylized lip-synching characterizes all of Chinna Satyam's dance dramas, and the excision of dialogues enables performers from a wide variety of linguistic backgrounds to participate in his cosmopolitan vision of Kuchipudi dance (Chinna Satyam 2012, 41). The adaptation of lip-synching also shifts the focus of the dance drama from voiced dialogues to mimetic gesture and vigorous dance movements. In the words of one of my village interlocutors, "How can Chinna Satyam's students speak their own dialogues when they're jumping all over the stage?" This contrasts with village performances of *Bhāmākalāpam*, in which the stage-right vocalist sings a *daruvu*, such as Satyabhama's introductory song, but only the performer enacting Satyabhama will speak her lines using an affected high-pitched voice. Such affectations of voice, *vācika abhinaya*, are entirely absent from Chinna Satyam's style of Kuchipudi, in which dancers never learn dialogue delivery in their years of training.

The shift from dialogue delivery in the context of village *Bhāmākalāpam* to stylized lip-synching in the context of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* results in a gender-incongruous presentation of Madhavi's character. For example, when Madhavi demands jewels for every day of the week, the male vocalist voices her lines while never once altering the pitch of his voice to *sound* like that of a woman's. This results in a curious situation in which the male performer lip-synchs dialogues voiced by a male vocalist to speak as a female-identified character. This is particularly apparent in the 2011 performance in which the female vocalist voiced Satyabhama's dialogues and the male vocalist voiced Madhavi's. Madhavi speaks as a woman within the context of the dialogue, yet lip-synchs the voice of the male vocalist, seated at the edge of stage-right.

Important also to Madhavi's portrayal are both sartorial presentation (*āhārya*) and gait (*āṅgika*): the female-identified character of Madhavi is performed by a male dancer dressed in a male-identified costume (i.e., stitched silk costume) but who also wears flowers in his hair, drapes his chest with a shawl, and moves in a feminine manner (similar in certain ways to the bodily gestures of Satyabhama discussed in chapter 2). By changing Madhavi's costume and bodily movements to partially male- and partially female-identified, Chinna Satyam alters the performance of the character itself into a gender-variant role, particularly in comparison to its village counterpart. And, as I will discuss in the next section, audiences viewing Chinna Satyam's rendering of Madhavi also view her, or perhaps more accurately *them*, as a gender-variant character. A juxtaposition of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* alongside its Kuchipudi village counterpart is helpful for understanding the distinctions across these two performance contexts (see Table 1).

As this table makes clear, the gender roles of Madhavi's character are enacted differently across village and urban/transnational spaces: in the Kuchipudi village,

TABLE 1. *Sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava across *Bhāmākalāpam* Performance Contexts

<i>Bhāmākalāpam</i> Performance Context	<i>Sūtradhāra</i>	Madhavi	Madhava
Kuchipudi village:	<i>Character:</i> Brahmin male-identified character serving a benedictory function; reappears throughout the performance; speaks to the audience and orchestra and plays the <i>naṭṭuvāṅgam</i> (cymbals)	<i>Character:</i> Satyabhama's female-identified confidante; appears in Satyabhama's presence and with Satyabhama and Krishna in the final scene	<i>Character:</i> Krishna's male-identified confidant; appears in Krishna's presence and with Satyabhama and Krishna in the final scene
	<i>Performance:</i> Brahmin male dancer with male-identified costume and gait; dialogue voiced by male dancer	<i>Performance:</i> Brahmin male dancer with male-identified costume and gait; dialogue voiced by male dancer	<i>Performance:</i> Brahmin male dancer with male-identified costume and gait; dialogue voiced by male dancer
	<i>Character:</i> Male-identified character serving a benedictory function; appears only in the beginning of the performance; does not play the <i>naṭṭuvāṅgam</i> (cymbals)	<i>Character:</i> Satyabhama's female-identified confidante; appears in Satyabhama's presence and with Satyabhama and Krishna in the final scene	<i>Character:</i> Krishna's male-identified confidant; appears only in Krishna's palace; does not reappear in the final scene with Satyabhama and Krishna
Chinna Satyam's <i>Bhāmākalāpam</i> :	<i>Performance:</i> Male dancer with male-identified costume and gait; dialogues voiced by male vocalist (seated stage-right)	<i>Performance:</i> Male dancer wearing a combination of male-identified and female-identified costume; "feminine" gait; dialogues voiced by male vocalist (seated stage-right)	<i>Performance:</i> Male dancer with male-identified costume and gait; dialogue voiced by male vocalist (seated stage-right)

there is an incongruity between the external gender performance of Madhavi in male-identified costume, gait, and speech, and the character's gender identity as Satyabhama's female-identified confidante. *Outward gender performance is enacted as distinct from gender identity.* By contrast, in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*,

there is synchronicity across Madhavi's external gender performance and the character's gender identity, both of which are read as reflecting some form of gender ambiguity. *Outward gender performance parallels gender identity.*

Relevant here is Judith Butler's ([1990] 2008, 187) distinction between three contingent dimensions of corporeality: anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.<sup>20</sup> Like Butler, I recognize both gender identity and gender performance as *contingent* dimensions that are performatively construed through "corporeal style," rather than reflective of an internal gender essence or core (190). The incongruity or synchronicity of gender identity and gender performance across *Bhāmākalāpam* contexts signals the contingency of gender itself, which can be entirely reimagined through simple changes in costume, gait, and speech. This is perhaps most apparent in the case of Chinna Satyam's choreographed version of Madhavi: the male dancer enacting Madhavi is not donning the *strī-vēṣam*, as in the case of the village brahmin man in Satyabhama's guise, but instead portraying a gender-variant *vēṣam* never before seen on the Kuchipudi stage.

#### "NEITHER AS A WOMAN NOR AS A MAN": INTERPRETING MADHAVI'S GENDER VARIANCE

Madhavi's gender-variant performance in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* is a source of ongoing speculation and criticism by practitioners and scholars of Kuchipudi dance. Here, I will examine the discourses of scholars, students, and village practitioners to analyze Chinna Satyam's experiments with Madhavi's character. Anuradha Jonnalagadda, a dance scholar and longtime student of Chinna Satyam's, highlights the historical context of Madhavi's gender portrayals by suggesting that previously in royal courts, a eunuch figure was often found within women's domestic spaces, a point that likely draws on textual sources, including the *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Sanskrit drama.<sup>21</sup> Jonnalagadda reads Madhavi not as a female character in the manner of village Kuchipudi performances, but rather as a eunuch who can move across public and domestic space. Jonnalagadda (1996b, 138) also highlights the character's comedic import:

In the traditional practice, *sutradhara* conducted the show as *nattuvanar*, singer, and also played the role of Madhavi, the *ishtasakhi* [beloved friend] of Satyabhama. He enters into a dialogue with her and plays a major role in eliciting information from her. He becomes Madhava, the *sakha* [friend] of Krishna, when he goes to him with the letter of Satyabhama. Thus, *sutradhara* helps in the continuation and development of the story. As different from this, Chinna Satyam introduced a separate character who becomes *sutradhara* in *Venivrittanta* (*Jadavrittanta*) [the opening benediction], Madhavi while in the company of Satyabhama and Madhava in the presence of Krishna. A change even in the attire and portrayal could be observed. He is attired *neither as a woman nor as a man* [emphasis added] and his movements are such that they evoke humour and thus provide a comic relief.



Jonnalagadda's suggestion that Chinna Satyam reimagined the character of Madhavi as "neither as a woman nor as a man" is reflected in the sentiments of several of Chinna Satyam's students. For example, Manju Bhargavi, one of Chinna Satyam's senior students, described Madhavi as belonging to a "third gender" (using the English term):

Madhavi is a third gender. When he, when Madhavi is with Satyabhama, the third gender becomes she. But when she goes to Krishna, she becomes he. So, wherever, whomever, Madhavi is enacting with, then it becomes that. When he is enacting with a male, then he becomes a male. When it's with a female, then it becomes a female.

Implicit in this analysis is a distinction between gender identity and gender performance. Bhargavi reads Madhavi's gender identity as belonging to a "third gender," but Madhavi's gender performance emerges differently depending on the character's proximity to Satyabhama or Krishna. The emergent nature of gender performance is reflected in the various pronouns employed by Bhargavi, including "she" to describe Madhavi near Satyabhama, "he" to describe Madhava near Krishna, and "it" to describe the character's gender-variance. This interpretation of Madhavi's gender performance mirrors, in a way, the discourse of village dancers who attribute the *sūtradhāra*/Madhavi/Madhava's unique shape-shifting ability to *māyā*. However, Bhargavi's characterization of Madhavi's identity as "third gender" differs starkly from my village interlocutors, who never employed such gender-variant terminology to describe village *Bhāmākalāpam* performances. Similar to Bhargavi, Chinna Satyam's son and student Ravi Shankar described Madhavi as a "third gender" character that was created by his father to bring about the humorous aspects of *Bhāmākalāpam*. Sasikala Penumarthi, a senior student of Chinna Satyam's, characterized Madhavi as "acting in between, not a boy and not a girl."

In addition to discussing Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* with his students, I also asked the brahmin performers of the Kuchipudi village. While my interlocutors in the village were reluctant to express criticism of Chinna Satyam in any other case, especially considering his globally recognized status as a stalwart Kuchipudi guru, several of them expressed outright disapproval at Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, specifically his changes to the character of Madhavi. As an example of this critique is the observation of Venku, who described to me the portrayal of Madhavi in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* by his late father, Vedantam Rattayya Sarma, in the Kuchipudi village:

That same Madhavi character, [Chinna Satyam] Garu did with my father. My father wore the wig and wore the *aṅgavastram* [upper cloth] and did it. When did he do it? It was when Manju Bhargavi [quoted above] did Satyabhama, and my father did Madhavi. I remember that time very well. When they did it in the Kuchipudi village, Vedantam Parvatisam Garu was an elder Kuchipudi guru. He came onstage and

scolded [my father]. He scolded him onstage ...That's because he was my father's guru. My father learned from Parvatisam Garu.

When Rattayya Sarma performed Chinna Satyam's Madhavi in the village, he was overtly critiqued by local gurus, including well-known village teacher Vedantam Parvatisam. By shifting the character of Madhavi from a brahmin male *vēṣam* to attired as neither a woman nor as a man, Chinna Satyam, and Rattayya Sarma by extension, were subject to outright criticism by their Kuchipudi village counterparts. Evincing this critique, Jonnalagadda (1996b, 138n132) writes: "This particular portrayal of Madhavi did attract criticism from traditionalists. They feel that the character degenerated with such portrayal."

Rattayya Sarma, along with his two sons Raghava and Venku, are (to my knowledge) the only brahmin men from the village of Kuchipudi skilled in enacting Madhavi's role in Chinna Satyam's version of *Bhāmākalāpam*. Although Raghava had previously enacted Madhavi in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, he was reluctant to portray the role in the September 2011 performance staged at Emory University in Atlanta, specifically stating that he did not want to enact Chinna Satyam's gender-variant Madhavi. Raghava finally agreed to perform the role in line with the visual appearance of Chinna Satyam's Madhavi *and* the discursive register of the Kuchipudi village Madhavi. Raghava visually enacted Chinna Satyam's Madhavi through costume and bodily movement *and* discursively constructed the village Madhavi through dialogue, which sets apart the Atlanta performance as an amalgamation of village and urban/transnational *Bhāmākalāpams*. Aware of the critique leveled by village gurus against his father years before, Raghava blended together both styles of enacting Madhavi, perhaps in an effort to avoid further critique.

As these disparate voices demonstrate, there is a range of terms employed by Kuchipudi practitioners to describe Chinna Satyam's re-envisioned version of Madhavi. Despite this breadth, there appears to be an underlying thread when interpreting Chinna Satyam's alterations to Madhavi: this character is read as expressing some form of gender variance, although the nature of this ambiguity is subject to interpretation. Whether Madhavi is described as a eunuch or "third gender," it seems clear that Kuchipudi practitioners have come to interpret Madhavi in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* as a gender-variant role.

#### RESISTANT VERNACULAR PERFORMANCE AND QUEER DIASPORA

While Chinna Satyam's students turned to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, Sanskrit drama, and even humor to justify his choices in rechoreographing Madhavi as a gender-variant character, the brahmins of the Kuchipudi village expressed outright disapproval. Their critiques of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* expose two overarching concerns about the drama more broadly, and the characters of Satyabhama and

Madhavi, in particular. First, the brahmins of the village are anxious about the movement of traditional elements of the Kuchipudi repertoire, namely *kalāpas* and *yakṣagāṇas*, outside of the village into cosmopolitan spaces in which caste and gender restrictions are obsolete. Siddhendra's prescriptions that all village brahmin men must impersonate Satyabhama is threatened in the event that non-brahmin and non-male bodies perform *Bhāmākalāpam*, particularly the role of Satyabhama. If there is no need for men to dance as women when women are dancing themselves, then how can village brahmin men attain their gender and caste ideals *without* impersonation?

Although my interlocutors rarely criticized Chinna Satyam for training women, the effects of his KAA are palpable for village brahmins. The concern about the influx of nonbrahmin and non-male dancers performing Kuchipudi is evident in the words of Vedantam Rajyalakshmi, the mother of dancers Venku and Raghava mentioned before. Rajyalakshmi said to me during an interview in 2014:

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

While I will discuss Rajyalakshmi and other Kuchipudi brahmin women further in chapter 5, it is important here to underscore the gender critique implicit in her words. According to Rajyalakshmi, there is a linear decline in performance from the past to the present: village brahmin men used to impersonate but nowadays "people are performing their own *pātras*," that is dancers are performing their own gender roles. Like many of my interlocutors, Rajyalakshmi avoided naming Chinna Satyam directly, but the effects of his KAA are certainly evident in her comments. By pragmatically doing away with Siddhendra's prescription to impersonate and also by introducing "outsiders" to the Kuchipudi stage, Chinna Satyam's urban and transnational style of Kuchipudi eclipses the possibility for brahmin men to don the *strī-vēṣam*, thus undermining the village's long-standing gender and caste norms.

Second, the critiques of Chinna Satyam's Madhavi stem from the anxieties of the village's brahmins, who are concerned about the intrusion of nonnormative discourses on gender and sexuality from urban and transnational spaces. These anxieties were apparent in the invocation of *kojja*, the Telugu equivalent

for the term *hijrā*.<sup>22</sup> For example, when I first asked one brahmin male performer about whether he would ever perform Madhavi's character in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, he expressed outright distaste, insisting that he would never take on "that *kojja-vēṣam*." In another case, the term *kojja* was invoked by a brahmin performer to describe a nonbrahmin male Kuchipudi dancer who dons the *strī-vēṣam* in urban performances. *Kojja*, for these brahmin performers, functions as a thinly veiled signifier to indirectly speak about issues of nonnormative sexuality, a topic that my brahmin interlocutors never broached directly in conversation. Because I was never able to discuss issues of sexuality outright with the brahmin men of Kuchipudi, the mention of *kojja* alerted me to the anxieties that brahmin men may harbor about the practice of impersonation. For my interlocutors, impersonation enacted by village brahmins is seen as adhering to a brahminical tradition of authority (*sāmpradāyam*) handed down by their founding saint Siddhendra. By comparison, impersonation by those *outside* the village is deemed inauthentic, at best; at worst, it is considered exemplary of nonnormative *hijrā/kojja* sexual practice (Reddy 2005).<sup>23</sup>

The discernible tenor of anxiety evident in the voices of Kuchipudi village brahmins regarding Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* signals the subversive possibility of his gender-variant Madhavi. Although Chinna Satyam's choices in choreographing Madhavi appear to be contextual, arising from his streamlined vision of Kuchipudi as cosmopolitan dance, the aesthetic effects of his *Bhāmākalāpam* are, I would argue, undeniably *queer*. Taking a cue from black queer theory and South Asian American studies, including the works of E. Patrick Johnson (2001, 2003), Gayatri Gopinath (2005, 2018), Shaka McGlotten (2016), and Kareem Khubchandani (2016), among others, I employ a queer of color critique to read Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*.

Most broadly, I read the urban and transnational spaces of Madras (present-day Chennai) and Atlanta as extensions of *queer diaspora*, in the words of Gopinath (2005, 2018). As spaces outside the boundaries of the Kuchipudi village, the urban and transnational contexts of Madras/Chennai and Atlanta function as sites of *diaspora*, a term that as Gopinath (2005, 6) notes in its most literal definition, "describes the dispersal and movement of populations from one particular national or geographic location to other disparate sites." In moving from the Kuchipudi village to Madras in the mid-twentieth century, Chinna Satyam inaugurated Kuchipudi on the diasporic stage, if we can read diaspora broadly as the spaces beyond the boundaries of the Kuchipudi *agrahāram* (brahmin quarters).

But how does Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* exist within spaces of *queer diaspora*? Gopinath (2005, 11) brings together the terms *queer* and *diaspora* to critique both the heteronormative and nationalist frameworks that cast diaspora within a Hindu nationalist imaginary:

Suturing "queer" to "diaspora" thus recuperates those desires, practices, and subjectivities that are rendered impossible and unimaginable within conventional diasporic

and nationalist imaginaries . . . If within heteronormative logic the queer is seen as the debased and inadequate copy of the heterosexual, so too is diaspora within nationalist logic positioned as the queer Other of the nation, its inauthentic imitation. The concept of a queer diaspora enables a simultaneous critique of heterosexuality and the nation form while exploding the binary oppositions between nation and diaspora, heterosexuality and homosexuality, original and copy. (11)

Relatedly, Jisha Menon (2013, 101) argues for the importance of urban theatre in shaping the emergence of queer selfhoods: “Theatre, as a social, expressive practice, lies at the intersection of discourse and embodiment and so provides a particularly fecund site to consider the emergence of queer selfhoods at the nexus of representation and desire.” Aesthetic practices that engage the visual, in this case staged performance, serve as critical sites for what Gopinath (2018, 8) more recently refers to as a *queer optic*, which “brings into focus and into the realm of the present the energy of those nonnormative desires, practices, bodies, and affiliations concealed within dominant historical narratives.”

Chinna Satyam’s urban and transnational reframing of Kuchipudi certainly participated (and continues to participate) in the dominant historical narrative of Indian dance, namely the classicization of Kuchipudi that mirrors the mid-twentieth-century “revival” of Bharatanatyam. Nevertheless, through his female Satyabhama and gender-variant Madhavi, Chinna Satyam opens the possibility of reading his cosmopolitan Kuchipudi within a visual aesthetics of queer diaspora. Uninhibited by the constraints of hegemonic brahmin masculinity entrenched in the Kuchipudi village, Chinna Satyam was able to experiment with alternative bodies—non-male-identified and even gender-variant—in his newly synthesized vision of Kuchipudi dance in the urban and transnational diaspora. By rechoreographing *Bhāmākalāpam*, the most religiously significant dance drama of Kuchipudi village tradition, Chinna Satyam opens the possibility for disruptive performance. To extend Gopinath’s (2005, 11) argument, Chinna Satyam’s *Bhāmākalāpam*, with its female Satyabhama and gender-variant Madhavi, functions as the inauthentic imitation or queer Other to the village’s *sāmpradāyam*, or its brahminical tradition of authority.

In addition to envisioning Chinna Satyam’s *Bhāmākalāpam* as an aesthetic practice of queer diaspora, I also read the dance drama as a “resistant vernacular performance” (Johnson 2005, 140), one that counters the long-standing norms of the Kuchipudi village, which position the brahmin impersonator as front and center. My understanding of resistant vernacular performance directly draws on the work of E. Patrick Johnson, who brings together discourses of blackness and performance to enable new readings of both black American culture and performance studies (2003, 7). In an article on black queer studies, Johnson (2001) critiques the persistent whiteness that informs the work of queer theorists beginning with Butler’s ([1990] 2008) *Gender Trouble*. Rejecting Butler’s eschewal of subjectivity, Johnson calls upon black “quare” studies to suture the gap between

performativity and performance in order to open the space for agency through the performance of identity.<sup>24</sup> For Johnson (2001, 12), queer vernacular performances serve as sites of resistance that “work on and against dominant ideology,” a process that José Esteban Muñoz (1999, 11) famously refers to as *disidentification*. Johnson (2001, 13) also imagines the scope of black queer performance beyond the stage to the everyday:

Theorizing the social context of performance sutures the gap between discourse and lived experience by examining how queers use performance as a strategy of survival in their day-to-day performances . . . Moreover, queer theory focuses attention on the social consequences of those performances. It is one thing to do drag on the club stage, yet another to embody a drag queen identity on the street. Bodies are sites of discursive effects, but they are sites of social ones as well.

Theorizing the social context of performance indicates that it is not simply circumscribed to the stage, but spills into and shapes quotidian life.

Related to Johnson’s analysis, it is helpful to turn to the practices of reading and throwing shade in drag performance.<sup>25</sup> In the context of drag balls, such as those portrayed in Jennie Livingston’s film *Paris Is Burning* (1990), parody occurs through verbal and nonverbal techniques of insult, namely the practices of “reading” and “throwing shade.”<sup>26</sup> Reading, as Shaka McGlotten (2016, 265) succinctly notes in their discussion of *Paris Is Burning*, “is an artfully delivered insult.” Also, in the context of the film, Butler ([1993] 2011, 88) links the practice of reading to a failure of impersonation:

For “reading” means taking someone down, exposing what fails to work at the level of appearance, or insulting or deriding someone. For a performance to work, then, means that a reading is no longer possible, or that a reading, an interpretation, appears to be a kind of transparent seeing, where what appears and what it means coincide. On the contrary, when what appears and how it is “read” diverge, the artifice of the performance can be read as artifice; the ideal splits off from its appropriation.

While reading is grounded in the verbal, throwing shade is a nonverbal gesture of insult. Throwing shade, according to McGlotten (2016, 279), “does not require any specific enunciation to deliver an insult; rather, it uses looks, bodily gestures, and tones to deliver a message.” As Dorian Corey, a stalwart drag queen interviewed by Livingston in *Paris Is Burning*, states: “Shade is, ‘I don’t tell you you’re ugly, but I don’t have to tell you because you know you’re ugly.’ And that’s shade” (McGlotten 2016, 265). Throwing shade—a term now popular in the American vernacular—is, at least in the context of *Paris Is Burning*, a nonverbal form of insult that parodies the practice of drag.

Chinna Satyam’s Satyabhama and Madhavi participate in the performative economy of reading and throwing shade through what Esther Newton (1979, 106)

refers to as incongruous juxtaposition. Madhavi's visual appearance in Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* provides a concrete example for this analysis. In both the 1981 and 2011 *Bhāmākalāpam* performances, the performer portraying Madhavi wore a silk upper cloth, or *aṅgavastram*, covering his bare, hairy chest. This upper cloth was not pinned in place, a stark contrast to the prodigious use of safety pins by contemporary Kuchipudi performers to ensure correct costuming. Instead, dancers—Dharmaraj in the video recording and Raghava in the staged performance—continuously fidgeted with their upper cloth by adjusting it over the shoulder, tucking the end into the waistband, and tying the entire cloth around the waist in the manner of the end of a woman's sari. At one point in the 2011 performance, Raghava-as-Madhavi adjusted his purple *aṅgavastram* by tying it around his waist and then fanned himself with it in a sign of fatigue from Satyabhama's excessive demands.

By playfully adjusting his *aṅgavastram*, Raghava-as-Madhavi visually parodies idealized womanhood, particularly as it is enacted by the character (Satyabhama) and performer (Penumarthi) onstage. The sartorial juxtaposition of the performer's hairy chest and the silken shawl (*aṅgavastram*) not only draws attention to Madhavi's gender-variance, but also throws shade at the character of Satyabhama, whose name literally translates as "True Woman." Raghava-as-Madhavi not only throws shade on Satyabhama, but Penumarthi as well, as is evident in the image in which Satyabhama is forced to comb through Madhavi's hair (see Figure 19). These performative acts are arguably queer gestures that challenge the heteronormative script of Kuchipudi dance; as Kareem Khubchandani (2016, 82) writes, dance has the capacity to free "movements and affects that have been repressed in our muscles by scripts of caste, racial, (post)colonial, heteronormative, and homonormative respectabilities." In Figure 19, for example, the male performer in gender-variant guise forces the female performer in Satyabhama's guise to do the menial task of combing their hair.

We can, in fact, envision Madhavi as a gender-variant *vidūṣaka* whose role, like the drag performer, serves to elicit humor through sartorial incongruity. This parody is made explicit through incongruous juxtaposition of Madhavi alongside Satyabhama. While the female performer enacting Satyabhama portrays the paradigmatic woman in love, the male performer enacting Madhavi parodies this gender portrayal, particularly by mixing outward gender signs. The presence of such parody, or what Fabio Cleto (1999) refers to as camp aesthetics, is absent in the performances of the Kuchipudi village. Although Madhavi-as-*vidūṣaka* in village *Bhāmākalāpam* parodies Satyabhama and the brahmin impersonator, particularly by poking fun at Satyabhama's ongoing lovesickness and the ineffable gluttony of brahmins, the parody remains, for the most part, circumscribed to the realm of discourse and not the visual field. Chinna Satyam's Madhavi, by contrast, exceeds the limits of discourse, both on the level of the staged dialogues and on the level of the heteronormative discursive regime underlying Kuchipudi





FIGURE 19. Satyabhama combs Madhavi's hair. Photo by Uzma Ansari.

village life. Madhavi-as-gender-variant *vidūṣaka* embodies an aesthetic practice of queer diaspora that counters this discursive regime through their outward visual signs (Gopinath 2018, 7). While on the discursive level of the drama, Madhavi might be Satyabhama's female friend (*sakhi*), on the visual level, Madhavi is Satyabhama's (and Penumarthi's) queer foil. And, if we juxtapose Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* alongside village performance, the female dancer guised as Satyabhama can be read as the queer foil to the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam*.

The disruptive possibilities of a gender-variant Madhavi and female Satyabhama are not lost on the community of brahmin men in the village of Kuchipudi. Chinna Satyam's choreography is interpreted by brahmins from his natal village as countering the long-standing tradition of authority ascribed to *Bhāmākalāpam*, a drama imbued with religious significance. Following Siddhendra's mandate, impersonating Satyabhama's *vēṣam* is a religious rite of passage that enables the construction of hegemonic brahmin masculinity in the village, evident in the case of Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma (see chapter 2). By contrast, Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* features a female Satyabhama and a gender-variant Madhavi. Within the binary logic of the village's brahmin male community, the queer diaspora enacted through Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* is envisioned as an "inauthentic imitation" of traditional village performance (Gopinath 2005).

Notably, Chinna Satyam's experiments with Kuchipudi must be situated against the backdrop of the urban revival of Indian classical arts and dance, which

is dominated by South Indian Smartha brahmins (Hancock 1999; Rudisill 2007; Peterson and Soneji 2008).<sup>27</sup> Although many of Chinna Satyam's well-known female dancers, including Sobha Naidu, Bala Kondala Rao, and Kamala Reddy, belong to dominant nonbrahmin Telugu castes (such as Kamma, Reddy, etc.), Chinna Satyam continued to express preference for brahmin dancers, including Manju Bhargavi and Sasikala Penumarthi, in his choreography. Chinna Satyam may have flouted village gender norms, but he still upheld the long-standing reliance on "Brahmin taste" in performance (Rudisill 2007, 103; Soneji 2012, 224). In other words, Chinna Satyam's experiments with Kuchipudi can never be divorced from the upper-caste, middle-class dance revival of South India in which the brahmin female body was (and continues to be) deemed aesthetically suitable to dance.

Despite Chinna Satyam's continued preference for brahmin female dancers, the brahmin men of the Kuchipudi village are, in many ways, secondary to his urban and transnational vision of Kuchipudi. In particular, the brahmin man in *strī-vēṣam* is entirely peripheral to Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam*, which features a female dancer in Satyabhama's *vēṣam* and a male dancer in Madhavi's gender-variant role. This glaring absence has real effects; namely, it destabilizes the possibility for achieving dominant ideals of gender, sexuality, and caste that undergird quotidian Kuchipudi village life. The dramatic enactments of a female Satyabhama or gender-variant Madhavi reframe the practice of impersonation beyond the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam*, thereby exemplifying the strategy of "working on and against" dominant frameworks (Muñoz 1999, 11–12). In divesting *Bhāmākalāpam* from the brahmin male body, Chinna Satyam's dance drama not only breaks from tradition, but also exposes the contingency of hegemonic brahmin masculinity, which is rendered remarkably fragile in the wake of transnational change. Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* also engenders the capaciousness of *vēṣam*, a performative practice that holds the power to simultaneously subvert and re-signify hegemonic norms.

#### IMPERSONATING KRISHNA

Although the KAA was replete with female students, Chinna Satyam was often bereft of male dancers to play lead characters in his religiously themed dance dramas, particularly those staged in the seventies and eighties. While Chinna Satyam tapped into his resources in the Kuchipudi village by importing many brahmin men to enact secondary roles in his dance dramas, such as sages, demigods, anti-gods, and kings, he shied away from such imports for his lead male characters, particularly the role of Krishna. Rather than using village male dancers to enact Krishna and other male leads, Chinna Satyam instead instituted the reverse trend of donning a man's guise (Telugu: *maga-vēṣam* or *puruṣa-vēṣam*) by casting his female dancers to perform these roles.<sup>28</sup> In fact, it was the norm for Chinna Satyam's female students to portray all the male leads in his dance dramas, including

Krishna in the dance dramas *Bhāmākalāpam*, *Sri Krishna Parijatam*, and *Rukmini Kalyanam*, Vishnu in *Padmavati Srinivasa Kalyanam*, and Shiva in *Haravilasam*. Chinna Satyam instituted a reverse trend in the KAA: although women were given the opportunity to play lead male characters, men were not given the opportunity to don the *strī-vēṣam* to enact female roles like Satyabhama, thereby eclipsing the long-standing tradition of the Kuchipudi village.<sup>29</sup>

Despite his practical reasons for establishing a trend of donning a man's guise, *maga-vēṣam*, Chinna Satyam was selective in the kinds of male roles he allowed his female dancers to enact. He cast only female dancers to portray the Hindu deity Vishnu and his manifestations such as Krishna or Srinivasa, but he cast both male and female dancers to play the role of Shiva. Akin to the detailed process of donning Satyabhama's guise, there is a highly stylized process that transforms the dancer into the role of Krishna or Vishnu, who in visual imagery is commonly depicted with a blue-gray tinge across his body (Dehejia 2009, 193). For both Chinna Satyam's female dancers and village brahmin male dancers, donning the Krishna/Vishnu *vēṣam* is a transformative process that can take over two hours and involves the application of blue makeup covering the entire body, as well as wearing a wig, ornaments, and costume (see Figures 14 and 20). Dancers enacting Krishna or Vishnu must also wear a blue vest to cover their chest area. In addition to costume and ornamentation, bodily movement (*āṅgika*) is also a crucial aspect of this form of impersonation. The dancer enacting the role of Krishna or Vishnu must maintain an upright bodily posture, while also expressing elements of amorous charm and boyish mischievousness.

In the case of dancer Manju Bhargavi, whose towering height and broad figure made her easily capable of donning the *maga-vēṣam*, she was so adept in her ability to impersonate male roles that she almost never portrayed female characters onstage during her twenty-plus years under Chinna Satyam's tutelage (Venkataraman 2012, 76–77). In a published interview, Bhargavi states: "Master [Chinna Satyam] told me that I looked like a 'Hij[r]a' when I did a female role and that it did not suit me one bit" (Venkataraman 2012, 78–79). In order to convince her guru otherwise, Bhargavi had to perform Satyabhama in *Bhāmākalāpam* and he finally agreed that she could, in fact, enact female roles. Nevertheless, dance critic Leela Venkataraman (2012, 79) observes: "for persons who watch Manju Bargavee, the inevitable feeling which cannot be avoided is that her body, so set to male roles, still needs to be more malleable in adjusting to enacting female roles in Kuchipudi." For Venkataraman, Bhargavi is only aesthetically appealing in *maga-vēṣam*.

When I interviewed Bhargavi in March 2010, she insisted that enacting Shiva, not Krishna or Vishnu, was the most difficult role she had ever portrayed:

As long as I performed for [Chinna Satyam], I only did the male characters. He didn't find somebody taller than me to perform a male role. I did justice to whatever male



FIGURE 20. Author impersonates Krishna. Photo by Uzma Ansari.

characters I performed. The Shiva in *Haravilasam* was the toughest I did. It was the toughest. For the female to do justice one hundred percent as a male, it was not easy. So, I had to put in a lot of effort.

In addition to emphasizing the difficulty of enacting Shiva's role "one hundred percent as a male," Bhargavi also suggested that Krishna is not as performatively challenging because of his "feminine" attributes (i.e., boyishness). Such interpretations of Krishna are characteristic of scholarship and popular perceptions of the Hindu deity, in which he is often considered more "feminine" in artistic and visual representations. Religious studies scholar Graham Schweig (2007, 442) explicitly makes this claim:

Krishna is usually depicted as an eternally youthful male adolescent, yet his masculine body appears to possess many feminine attributes. The significance of such feminine aspects of the visage and bodily appearance of Krishna have yet to be fully appreciated by Western scholars. It is no accident that most Westerners, unfamiliar with the deity of Krishna, take artistic renderings of Krishna's form to be that of a woman!

In a similar vein, pointing to the paintings of artist Raja Ravi Varma in the late nineteenth century, art historian Cynthia Packert (2010, 24–25) highlights the fusion period of European modernism and Indian subject matter as "the beginning of a genre that continues in full measure today—presenting Krishna as a dewy-eyed, gender-bending poster boy."<sup>30</sup> While not dealing with the subject of gender directly, Karline McLain (2009, 28) notes in her study of the *Amar Chitra Katha* (ACK) comic books that because Krishna is described in classical Indian texts as a "slim, beautiful, blue-tinged or dark skinned adolescent, [Anant Pai, the creator of ACK] balked at images of a fair-skinned Krishna with bulging muscles." In fact, when it came to the illustrations of his initial comic book, Pai insisted that Krishna remain a "blue boylike figure" while allowing the other male characters in the story to be portrayed "with an overdeveloped musculature, holding their exaggerated upper bodies in postures reminiscent of Tarzan" (28). Krishna, unlike his hypermasculinized counterparts, retains a wistful youthfulness on the cover of the ACK comic book *Krishna* (26).<sup>31</sup>

The reading of Krishna as somehow more "feminine" or less "masculine" is predicated upon a Euro-American binary framework of gender (Sinha 2012), which does not take into account the alternative gender configurations ubiquitous in South Asia. Kuchipudi performance, both within the village and in urban and transnational spaces, demands a rereading of gender categories more broadly, and masculinity in particular. As is evident from the embodied techniques of impersonation surveyed in chapter 2, village brahmin men are, for the most part, unconcerned with global (and primarily American) conceptions of hegemonic masculinity (Thangaraj 2015). Instead of sporting muscular chests and bulging biceps, Kuchipudi brahman men cultivate an ideal image of womanhood through



their male-identified bodies. Hegemonic brahmin masculinity is possible only by enacting Satyabhama's *vēṣam* onstage. By contrast, Chinna Satyam's Kuchipudi refigures the masculinities of divine characters. By repeatedly casting female dancers to enact Krishna, even during times when he could have used male dancers, Chinna Satyam suggests that Krishna's masculinity is *most legible through a woman's body*. Thus, the phenomenon of impersonation in Chinna Satyam's dance dramas reinterprets masculinity by detaching it from the sole domain of the brahmin male body.

Disengaging masculinity from the male body parallels the work of queer theorist Jack Halberstam (1998), who suggests that we reject normative, naturalizing modes of masculinity found in American contexts by separating masculinity from the male body. For Halberstam, "masculinity becomes legible as masculinity where and when it leaves the white-middle-class male body" (2). In short, Halberstam calls for masculinity without men. In a chapter discussing drag performances among black and Latinx queer communities in New York City, Halberstam argues that in comparison to drag queens, there is a noticeable dearth of the drag queen's counterpart, the drag king (231). As Halberstam points out, the history of public recognition of the drag king, and what he calls *female masculinity* more broadly, is most frequently characterized by stunning absences.<sup>32</sup> Halberstam goes on to attribute this distinction to the nonperformativity of masculinity; while femininity "reeks of the artificial," masculinity "adheres 'naturally' and inevitably to men [and thus] masculinity cannot be impersonated" (234–35). Thus, while drag queen performances are exaggerated parodies that expose the artificiality of femininity, drag king performances emphasize "a reluctant and withholding kind of performance" (239).<sup>33</sup> When interpreting the acts of drag kings, Halberstam notes: "the drag kings, generally speaking, seemed to have no idea of how to perform as drag kings . . . The drag kings had not yet learned how to turn masculinity into theater" (245).

A parallel de-emphasis on impersonating masculinity prevails in the Kuchipudi context. In comparison to village practices of donning the *strī-vēṣam*, donning the *vēṣam* of Krishna or Shiva lacks analogous authority in Chinna Satyam's KAA, despite the extensive efforts of sartorial and bodily guising that must ensue. While the male roles in Chinna Satyam's dance dramas are, for the most part, divine characters present in Hindu epic and Purāṇic narratives, impersonating them does not carry the same religious weight as impersonating Satyabhama. Even the terminology—the use of *maga-vēṣam* or *puruṣa-vēṣam* (man's guise)—lacks the frequency of usage of *strī-vēṣam* in the discursive registers of my interlocutors. Like American drag performance, impersonating masculinity is devoid of the pagentry of performing femininity on the Kuchipudi stage.

Brahminical authority and appeals to tradition, *sāmpradāyam*, also shape the importance bestowed on impersonation in the village context, as opposed to Chinna Satyam's urban and transnational locales. In the case of the Kuchipudi

village, donning Satyabhama's *vēṣam* functions as a religious rite of passage for the village's hereditary brahmin male community, one that, according to village brahmins, is sanctioned by their founding saint Siddhendra himself. Upholding impersonation in this manner is not only an appeal to tradition, but also an attempt by brahmin men at maintaining power, particularly given the globalization of Kuchipudi dance beyond the boundaries of its natal village. By contrast, the women who impersonate Krishna or Shiva in Chinna Satyam's KAA exist in urban and transnational spaces in which the upper-caste and/or upper-class female dancing body is now ubiquitous. To impersonate Krishna in the urban setting of the KAA is a pragmatic act of necessity; by contrast, to impersonate Satyabhama in the village is simultaneously a fulfillment of a religious prescription and an act of maintaining power. Simply stated, donning the *strī-vēṣam* is ritually far more significant to Kuchipudi tradition than the more recent phenomenon of *maga-vēṣam*. This difference across *strī-vēṣam* and *maga-vēṣam* ultimately suggests that not all acts of impersonation are the same. Yet, taking a cue from Halberstam's (1998) work, I argue that the aesthetic effects of Chinna Satyam's *Bhāmākalāpam* divest masculinity from the brahmin male body; through his female Krishna, female Satyabhama, and gender-variant Madhavi, Chinna Satyam makes possible alternative configurations of masculinity *and* impersonation beyond the purview of village brahmin men.

. . .

While I will never know for certain, it seems likely from my interviews that when choreographing *Bhāmākalāpam*, Chinna Satyam gave no thought to the subversive possibilities of his creative vision. Instead, he was faced with on-the-ground realities of recasting his village's traditional dance drama for the heteroglossia of a cosmopolitan context (Katrak 2011, 14). Chinna Satyam often choreographed with his dancers in front of him, a point that was repeatedly relayed to me by his students during my fieldwork at the KAA.<sup>34</sup> In the case of *Bhāmākalāpam*, Chinna Satyam choreographed the dance drama drawing on the memories of his earlier dance drama, *Sri Krishna Parijatam*, and the stylized enactments of the two (non-brahmin) dancers in front of him—Sobha Naidu as Satyabhama and Dharmaraj as Madhavi. In fact, Chinna Satyam's student Sasikala Penumarthi and his daughter Chavali Balatripurasundari both noted that Dharmaraj, a stage actor by training, was likely responsible for Madhavi's humorous movements, rather than Chinna Satyam himself. According to these dancers, Chinna Satyam provided basic guidance to enact Madhavi, but Dharmaraj filled in the lines and fleshed out the humorous nature of the character.

Whatever the reasons may have been, the result is remarkably disruptive, particularly for the brahmins of the village. Flouting the prescription of Siddhendra himself, Chinna Satyam cast a female Satyabhama and reversed the long-standing trend of impersonation to cast a female Krishna. Moreover, Madhavi, described



variously as a eunuch or “third gender,” is performatively queer in the character’s ability to be neither here nor there. Madhavi’s sartorial incongruity and humorous appearance positions them as the drama’s gender-variant character whose role pokes fun at both Satyabhama and the female dancer donning Satyabhama’s *vēṣam*. If we juxtapose Chinna Satyam’s *Bhāmākalāpam* alongside village performance, the presence of a female Satyabhama further critiques the brahmin male body in *strī-vēṣam*. When taken together, the playful possibilities of a female Satyabhama, female Krishna, and gender-variant Madhavi open new avenues for resistant vernacular performance (Johnson 2001) on the Kuchipudi stage.

It is the critique of the brahmin men of the Kuchipudi village, rather than the drama alone, that bestows Chinna Satyam’s *Bhāmākalāpam* with its full disruptive potential. The vocal condemnation expressed by my village interlocutors regarding Chinna Satyam’s Madhavi, coupled with the subtler critique of a female dancer enacting Satyabhama, underscore the heteronormative anxieties within the village’s brahmin community. Chinna Satyam’s *Bhāmākalāpam*, enacted on the urban and transnational stages of queer diaspora (Gopinath 2005), reveals the artifice of both brahmin identity and hegemonic masculinity. Shifting *Bhāmākalāpam* beyond the village to queer diaspora exposes sites of resistance to the configuration of Kuchipudi dance as village brahmin male tradition. By introducing a gender-variant Madhavi, female Satyabhama, and female Krishna on the Kuchipudi stage, Chinna Satyam’s *Bhāmākalāpam* reveals not only the artifice of gender but also the artifice of caste and sexuality. To paraphrase Halberstam (1998, 2), the capaciousness of *vēṣam* can only become fully possible where and when it leaves the brahmin male body. The scope of Chinna Satyam’s resistant vernacular performance, however, does not extend to his domestic life, which, as I explore in the next chapter, is circumscribed by his natal village’s gender and caste norms.