

Kuchipudi

'Krishna Sabdam', a popular
dance soaked in 'sringara', portrayed by
Yamini Krishnamurti



In traditional Kuchipudi the performers are all men. Vedantam Satyam as
Satyabhama in the leading play 'Bhama Kalapam'

'Darbar' scene from a play





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Kuchipudi

The years between the sixth and tenth centuries A.D. were milestones in the evolution of religious doctrine in India. At this time, the *bhaktimarga*, a spiritual movement which started in Tamil Nadu, was rapidly spreading towards the north and the east. This cult of *bhakti* gave a fresh orientation to the striving for comprehending the divine. It taught that the infallible way of attaining spiritual union with God was not through offering sacrifices, conducting rituals, undertaking pilgrimages or reciting prayers, but through the force of pure love and fervent yearning for God. The cult also gave rise to a body of seers and mystics who, with their spiritually-intoxicated souls to inspire them, went from place to place, giving expression to their sublime ecstasy by composing and singing hymns in glory of their Lord. These hymns, though they embodied the teachings of the Puranas, the Upanishads and other Hindu scriptures, were worded in the language of the masses and rendered in simple melodies. Hence, they had a ready appeal to all and rapidly built up a prodigious following.

In South India, the *bhakti* movement also gave rise to an order of *yogis* who, unlike saints of their and even of a later age, were of the conviction that *bhakti* to God, when done through music, was good, but that it was better if done through the combined arts of music, dance and drama. They thus started a movement by which *bhaktas* began to approach their God by singing, dancing and acting in His honour. The themes they used for this purpose were borrowed mostly from Bhagavata lore; hence these *bhakta*-artistes came to be known as *bhagavatars* in Tamil Nadu and *bhagavatulus* in Andhra. And it is these *bhagavatars* that later came to be credited with the genesis of the Bhagavata Mela Nataka and the *bhagavatulus* of the



Kucipudi dance-drama. It can be seen, therefore, that there is a close relationship between the two traditions. Indeed it can be said that the Bhagavata Mela Nataka is the counterpart in Tamil Nadu of the Kuchipudi of Andhra.

The art of the dance-dramas in Andhra and in Tamil Nadu seems to have attained a good state of development as early as the 16th century A.D. Though no conclusive proofs are available, it is nevertheless certain that proto-types of the Bhagavata Mela Nataka and the Kuchipudi must have existed prior to the 16th century. Inscriptions of the 8th, 9th and 10th centuries reveal the prevalence in Andhra, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka of a variety of theatrical diversions composed of music, dance and drama known as the Brahmana Mela or the Nattuva Mela.

Even earlier was another form of entertainment known as the Shiva Lila Natyam; this seems to have been replaced by introducing Vaishnavite themes into it and eventually giving it a different identity altogether. Araiyan Natanam is another type, or perhaps another name for an already mentioned type of dance-drama; this, it is said, was performed on festive occasions in certain Vaishnavite temples of Tamil Nadu. Apart from these stylised forms of stage presentations, there have been—and still are—in existence in Tamil Nadu and Andhra, a variety of dramatic performances, the simple and crude rendering of which makes it evident that they have from the outset been intended only for the laity. Such performances are known as Teru Koothu in Tamil Nadu and Veethi Natakam in Andhra. A tradition similar to these also survives in Jaffna and Batticaloa, the Tamil-speaking regions of Sri Lanka, where the art is known as Nattu Koothu.

The Yakshagana, of Karnataka, is yet another type of dance-drama belonging to the same family; in fact, in Andhra the texts of the Kuchipudi plays are even today known as Yakshaganas. Thus, it can be seen that various modes of dance-dramas have preceded the Bhagavata Mela Nataka and the Kuchipudi. It may not, therefore, be too much to surmise that the Bhagavata Mela Nataka and the Kuchipudi have evolved out of these earlier forms.

The Kuchipudi, as of course also the Bhagavata Mela Nataka, is an art with the sentiment of devotion permeating literally every aspect of it. The Kuchipudi came into existence in the 17th century, a time of considerable consequence to the rise of the cult of *bhakti*. As pointed out earlier, the art is in fact a product of the *bhakti* movement itself. Like the Keertanas, Harikathas and Kalakshepams—all forms of musical gathering or discourse connected with worship—these dance-dramas too helped to arouse in the people consciousness of matters divine. Two persons of that period are generally credited with having created these arts by bringing about a synthesis of music, dance and drama for the specific purpose of expounding the philosophic truths of the epics and the Puranas. These two luminaries, both ascetics, were Tirtha Narayana Yati and Sidhyendra Yogi.

Tirtha Narayana Yati was one of a family of Telugu Brahmins which



had settled down in the Tanjavur District during the time of the Vijayanagar kings. From his childhood, he was greatly interested in music and dance. He was very fond of singing the *ashtapadis* of the Geet Govinda, and he sang them so persistently and so well that people readily believed him to be an incarnation of Jayadeva, the author of the Geet Govinda. Tirtha Narayana was a devout *bhakta* of Krishna and he wanted to write a work on his *lilas*, or deeds. Consequently, he wrote the Krishna Lila Tarangini in the form of a musical opera. He trained a few disciples and presented this opera in music and dance before the deity of the temple. It is said that Lord Krishna appeared before Tirtha Narayana at the conclusion of this presentation of the Krishna Lila Tarangini. Tirtha Narayana spent some years of his life at Varahur in the Tanjavur District. The original name for this village was Bhupatirajapuram, and Tirtha Narayana makes mention of this in his Krishna Lila Tarangini. The fact that Tirtha Narayana stayed at Varahur and wrote his famous work there is to this day considered a hallowed privilege by the people of Varahur. Even now the annual festival of Krishna Jayanti at this place is marked by a complete and faithful rendering in song of the Krishna Lila Tarangini.

Sidhyendra Yogi, the other ascetic, was a disciple of Tirtha Narayana. He, too, was a Telugu Brahmin and a confirmed devotee of Lord Krishna. Lord Krishna, it is said, one day appeared before Sidhyendra Yogi and told him that he would attain liberation if he wrote the story of the Parijatapaharana, or the Stealing of the Parijata Flower, in the form of a *sringara kavya*, a love epic. Sidhyendra Yogi obeyed this directive and wrote the Parijatapaharana. He then desired to propagate this and to do so he needed suitable talent. He would have no truck with the *devadasis*, for they were considered impure. He went to the village of Kuchelapuram and gathered a group of Brahmin boys who were prepared to assist him. With their help he produced and presented the play written by him. It is said that Lord Krishna was immensely pleased with Sidhyendra Yogi who, in gratitude for this acknowledgement, took a vow from all the boys of Kuchelapuram who participated in his play that they would continue to enact the Parijatapaharana at least once every year. They, in turn, further assured him that that they would see that their sons and grandsons continued to act the same play in the same way at the same village of Kuchelapuram. Thus it is that to this day the tradition of the Parijatapaharana survives in the village of Kuchelapuram.

Of the two, Tirtha Narayana and Sidhyendra Yogi, the disciple Sidhyendra of the master Tirtha Narayana seems to have made the greater contribution to the art of dance-drama. His Parijatapaharana still stands as a masterpiece in the field. He created the art at Kuchelapuram and thus made the name of this village live for ever, for Kuchelapuram later came to be known as Kuchipudi and the dance-drama form named after this village spread to several other places in Andhra. However, with the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire, the art and patronage to it received a setback. But



while this was happening in Andhra, the Telugu Nayak rulers at Tanjavur were creating new centres of patronage for this and other similar arts.

Thus, the tradition of Kuchipudi went over from Kuchipudi to Tanjavur, and thereafter developed at each place according to the dictates of circumstance.

As explained earlier, the Kuchipudi art takes its name after the village of its birth. Sidhyendra Yogi stayed here and worshipped at the Ramalingeswara temple. It is believed that Kuchipudi was the village of Sidhyendra Yogi's in-laws. He created the dance-drama technique and presented it for the first time with the help of the boys and the young men of Kuchipudi. Evidence is further available that he also gave a performance before Abdul Hasan Tahnisha, Nawab of Golkonda, and thereby pleased this patron so much that he issued a copper-plate grant, whereby he gave away the village of Kuchipudi as a gift to the Brahmin families of this village, whose members had participated in the play. This award was made with the stipulation that the beneficiaries would continue to nurture the art and strive to ensure its perpetuation. This happened somewhere around 1675 and since then successive generations of the originally privileged Brahmin families of Kuchipudi have pursued the profession of Kuchipudi dancing as a sacred duty and thereby kept the tradition alive to this day.

Kuchipudi is a very small village and it is situated in the estuary of the river Krishna. It has a centrally situated temple which is dedicated to Ramalingeswara. Other deities worshipped at this temple are Veerabhadra, Balatripurasundari and Anjaneer. Kuchipudi is an exclusively Brahmin village and several of the families here are descended from those to whom the village was originally gifted. Performances of dance-dramas were given at this village in front of the local temple. These were at first in the open air, on the bare floor but later, a stage was erected outside the temple. Though Kuchipudi was the main centre of the art, parties of artistes giving similar performances also sprang up at other places near this village. Outstanding among such places were Srisailam, Kappatralla, Alampoor, Banganapalli, Marampalli and Mandapeta. With the fall of the Vijayanagar Empire, however, the art received a heavy blow at all these places, including Kuchipudi. At present, the tradition of the Kuchipudi dance-drama survives at Kuchipudi and at a few other centres in Andhra Pradesh.

The Kuchipudi dance-drama is also sometimes known as Ata Bhagavatam. The plays are in Telugu and, traditionally, all roles are taken by men alone. The technique of the art reveals a fine balance between *nritya*—sequences of dance movement and footwork, *nritya*—dance in the form of expressional work, and *vachika abhinaya* or expression conveyed through song and speech. It is this additional element of *vachika abhinaya* which makes arts such as Kuchipudi and Bhagavata Mela Nataka not merely dance but dance-drama. For here the performers portray themes through gesture and mime, as well as song and speech, the song and speech being also rendered by them and not by the supporting musicians. However, in



Kuchipudi, there are also items in the technique which are intended to be performed solo and which can well be described as dance in the form of *nrita* or *nritya*. Such solo numbers are presented either by introducing them as additional divertissements in dance-drama or by rendering them as independent pieces in dance concerts.

The votaries of the Kuchipudi school seem to have laid much stress on technical perfection in their work. Indeed, a Kuchipudi artiste, apart from being a dancer and an actor, is also expected to have a high proficiency in the Sanskrit and Telugu languages, have a good knowledge of music, and be well versed in the various texts pertaining to his art. Kuchipudi artistes claim that their art is based on the Abhinaya Darpana and the Natya Shashtra. Apart from these, there are certain other texts, in Sanskrit or Telugu, to which these artistes turn for guidance and edification. Important in this category are such works as Rasamanjari, Sabharanjani and Bharatarasapra-karana. Equally important, perhaps more so, to the Kuchipudi artiste are the various technical details that have been handed down by practical demonstration from generation to generation.

The technique of Kuchipudi incorporates all three aspects of the histrionic art as expounded by the Hindu texts, namely, *nrita*, *nritya* and *natya*. In *nrita* are items of pure dance comprising footwork and movements of limbs, using *adavus*, *jatis* and *teermanams*, more or less as is true of the *nrita* of the Sadir aspect of Bharata Natyam. These items are generally used as decorative pieces to adorn the sequence of a play. They have no bearing on the theme of the play; they have no theme of their own; they are sheer physical dances intended to display the virtuosity of the performer. In this group are included pieces such as the Puja Nritya, Jatiswaram, Tillana and Kannakole. The Puja Nritya is a dance of invocation, generally performed at the beginning of a concert, and is rather like the Alarippu of Bharata Natyam. It is longer than the Alarippu, though, for it lasts about ten minutes. Sometimes a *sloka* in praise of Nataraja is also introduced into it and appropriate *abhinaya* rendered for that portion. The Jatiswaram and Tillana, again, are similar to such items in the repertoire of Bharata Natyam.

It is to be noted, however, that though the system of *adavus* followed by Kuchipudi is closely related to that obtaining in Bharata Natyam, each has a distinct stylistic identity and flavour of its own. Stamping of the foot on the unaccented beats of the rhythm and a recurring dipping and bobbing of the body are two dominant characteristics of the Kuchipudi manner. The Kannakole is an item composed mainly of footwork. It also has body movements, but these are given a secondary importance. In this a refrain of *tala*-syllables is provided by the musicians and the dancer shows his skill by improvising varying patterns of footwork within the framework of that *tala*.

The *nritya* part of Kuchipudi has mainly items such as Sabdams, Slokams and Padams. These *nritya* items too, like the *nrita* numbers, may be added to dance-dramas for adornment or rendered as independent numbers.



The Sabdams, as in Bharata Natyam, are poetic compositions in praise of some deity or patron. Among the more popular Sabdams are the Krishna, the Manduka and the Dasavatara. The Krishna Sabdam, which is from the play Usha Parinayam, shows the *nayika*, or beloved, all dressed up waiting for Krishna to come to her. The Manduka Sabdam recounts the story of a female frog who emerges from a pond as the stunning beauty Mandodari, who is then carried off by Ravana to Sri Lanka as his queen. An interesting feature of this Sabdam is that groups of rhythmic syllables are introduced vocally in such a way that they create, as intended, the effect of croaking frogs. The Dasavatara Sabdam unfolds a sequence of song and action depicting the principal events leading to the coming into being of the ten incarnations of Vishnu. This Sabdam can be said to be indispensable to the technique, for there is literally no Kuchipudi dance-drama or presentation which does not feature it. A special variety of Sabdam, which is peculiar only to the Kuchipudi technique, comprises what are sometimes called Abhishekams. In these the story of a god beginning with his birth, giving details of the major happenings in his life, and ending with his coronation or glorification is presented in the form of a slick *abhinaya* sequence. Important in this group are numbers such as the Ramapattabhishekam and Prahladapattabhishekam, the former on the Lord Rama and the latter on the divine boy Prahlada.

The Slokams, like the Sabdams, are pieces for *abhinaya*, or expression, rendered solo. The important thing in the Slokam is its expression; hence it is common for Kuchipudi dancers to perform Slokams in a sitting position. A favourite type of Slokam is the one which has a theme giving scope for *vipralambha sringara*, or love in its aspect of suffering born of temporary separation. Padams are love-songs, and the manner of showing them in Kuchipudi is the same as in Bharata Natyam. The most popular Padams in Kuchipudi are of the great composer Kshetrajna. Kshetrajna's Padams are in slow tempo, composed with some *nayak-nayika*, or lover-beloved, situation in mind, and are particularly suitable for portraying emotion through dance. Some of the other leading compositions that are used as stray items for expressional work in Kuchipudi are Ashtapadis from the Geet Govinda of Jayadeva and the Kritis of the saint-singer Tyagaraja.

Tirtha Narayana Yati, as we know, composed the Krishna Lila Tarangini. This work is a regular biography of Krishna, beginning with his birth and ending with his marriage to Rukmini. It is recognised as the longest opera in the Sanskrit language. A feature of the composition is that the author has introduced cadences of rhythmic dance syllables at the end of several cantos of the play. Since these sequences are an integral part of the composition, and as dance syllables are intended only to be danced, it is evident that Tirtha Narayana designed the Krishna Lila Tarangini as a dance-opera.

In Kuchipudi, it is common to present excerpts from this work either as individual dance pieces or as parts of longer dramas. The first *charana* or section of the Krishna Lila Tarangini, in particular, is a very popular and



famous dance. Known as the Balagopala Tarangam, it deals with well-known incidents in the childhood of Krishna. It is a composition of five stanzas and these are all interspersed with effective patterns of dance syllables. The rendering of the Balagopala Tarangam gives an additional colour to the Kuchipudi technique, which is unique to this item. For in this it is customary for the performer to combine dance with modest feats of balancing, such as planting the feet on the rim of a metal plate or balancing a pot on the head.

Sidhyendra Yogi composed and contributed the dance-drama known as the Parijatapaharana to the Kuchipudi repertoire. This play is more commonly known as *Bhama Kalapam*. It is a play requiring five characters—Satyabhama, Rukmini, Krishna, Narada and a *sakhi*, or female friend, and when presented in its entirety takes from seven to ten nights. The story of the Bhama Kalapam recounts how Satyabhama compels Krishna to get and plant the celestial *parijata* tree in her garden after Krishna had given Rukmini a flower from such a tree. The chief merit of the play lies in its elaborate treatment of the character of Satyabhama, which gives full scope for the portrayal of practically all types of *nayikas*. Since Satyabhama's role is the most important in the Kuchipudi tradition, even as Bhama Kalapam is the greatest dance-drama of Kuchipudi, every aspiring Kuchipudi artiste yearns to appear in this role at least once in his dance career.

Inspired evidently by the Bhama Kalapam, the Golla Kalapam is another important dance-drama. This was written by Ramiah Sastri and was added to the Kuchipudi repertory in the latter half of the 19th century. The play is in the form of a dialogue, philosophic in approach, between a Brahmin and a milkmaid. There is no regular story here but only a discussion on various topics such as the utility or otherwise of sacrificial rites or as to what should constitute ideal family life. The discussion cleverly veers round to the aphoristic truth that a man is not what he is born as but what he becomes after initiation by his preceptors.

Kuchipudi plays are enacted in the open air and on improvised stages. The performances take place at night only. The presentation begins with some stage rites, which are performed in full view of the audience. Then the *sutradhara*, or the conductor, and the supporting musicians come on the stage and give a play of rhythm on the drums and cymbals. They next sing a prayer in honour of Balatripurasundari, the goddess at the Ramalingeswara temple at Kuchipudi. This is followed by the entry of a small boy wearing the mask of Ganapati. He cuts capers for a while and then disappears. The *sutradhara* then delivers a *sloka* through which he explains the theme and the purpose of the play and counsels the audience to see it attentively, for their own good.

The *sutradhara*, it may be noted, has a dominant part in Kuchipudi plays, for he not only conducts the music but also speaks lines by way of dialogue with the principal characters and while doing so, he all along injects cracks and witticisms which, more often than not, provide the only humour in a presentation. Because of his important place in the contribution, the



sutradhara appears in make-up and costume and he also carries with him a short curved stick known as *kutilaka*, as a symbol of his authority.

There is no curtain on the traditional Kuchipudi stage. But it is a part of the conventional presentation to introduce the principal characters in the play by first presenting them behind a stretched piece of cloth held by two persons. This improvised screen does not cover the character fully, for the face and feet are left visible. A few steps and movements of dance are done by the character behind this curtain prior to its removal. Though not so common now, formerly illumination was provided by installing oil lamps or providing gas-lights. Another interesting feature of earlier times was that a kind of powder known in Telugu as *guggilam* was used to provide a sudden flare at the climatic junctures of the play.

In a Kuchipudi performance, each principal character introduces himself or herself on the stage with a *daru*. A *daru* is a small composition of dance and song specially designed for each character to help him or her reveal his or her identity and also to show the performer's skill in the art. The *darus* are a part of the actual text of the dance-dramas and are not, as is likely to be imagined, improvised pieces. There are some six varieties of *darus* but the one most commonly employed in the dance-dramas is what is known as the *patra pravesa daru*. A leading example of this is the *daru* beginning with the words *Bhamane Satyabhamane*, by means of which the heroine Satyabhama introduces herself in the Bhama Kalapam.

Another peculiar feature of the Kuchipudi dance-drama is what is called *pagati veshamu*. This implies the addition of comic pieces to a play which are not in the original text. They are added to relieve the tedium of serious sequences. They are usually improvised on the spot and there are no set rules governing their rendering.

The make-up and costume in Kuchipudi are characteristic of the art. There is nothing elaborate in the make-up, if one compares this with, say, Kathakali. For the most part, the characters paint and powder their face in a single natural colour. Male characters may wear moustaches and beards, while female ones may add plaits to their hair-do. In the case of one particular character, this plait assumes exceptional importance. This refers to Satyabhama, who, after singing her entry *daru*, grabs her artificial and stone-studded braid and throws it over the curtain which is stretched in front of her towards the audience. This action implies that along with the braid, Satyabhama has also thrown a challenge to anyone in the audience to dispute her proficiency in the art. And should anyone accept this challenge and defeat Satyabhama, the braid is cut into two, to signify her humiliation, and the play is started all over again with another person in the role of Satyabhama.

The costume of the female characters is simple and consists generally of a sari and blouse worn in the usual way. It deserves to be remarked, though, that present-day artistes are tending more and more to relinquish the traditional *sari* in favour of the ready-made fan-fronted costume which



practically every Bharata Natyam danseuse can be seen wearing these days. The male characters wear *dhotis* and colourful coats and jackets and crowns and ornaments. The ornaments, which are made from a special kind of soft wood found in parts of Andhra, look chunky but are extremely light in weight.

The music in Kuchipudi is classical Karnatak. The principal singer is the *sutradhara*, who is also conductor of the play. As in the case of the *nattuvanar* in Bharata Natyam, the *sutradhara* sings the text and at the same time gives a rendering of the rhythmic dance syllables through the symbols he has in his hands. The *mridanga*, the violin and the clarionet are the common instruments employed as accompaniment.

It has been observed earlier, that the Bhagavata Mela Nataka dance-drama of Tamil Nadu is an extension of the Kuchipudi of Andhra. It needs to be noted, however, that that holds good only where the frame of reference is history. In the matter of technique, the Bhagavata Mela follows the pure Bharata Natyam of the *devadasi* order, and though this system is closely related to the Kuchipudi mode, it nevertheless has to be acknowledged that it has a distinct character of its own. Again, where flavour is concerned, it can well be suggested that the Kuchipudi is more earthly, more accommodative to *rasas* like the *sringara*, while the Bhagavata Mela is out-and-out drenched with *bhakti*, and *bhakti* alone.



Orissi

A tender moment from the erotico-mystic poem
Geet Govinda, by Alok Panikar



'Playing the drum', an ornamental pose using the
'tribhanga', or three-bend, position of the body,
by Sonal Mansingh



A typical attitude reminiscent of temple carving,
by Sanjukta Panigrahi





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Orissi

It is evening in Puri. A lone figure moves up between the pillars of the temple of Jagannath and tugs purposefully at a rope. The temple bell resounds in peals, announcing that it is the time of the Lord's evening meal. The portals of the Lord's sanctuary are opened and a woman, ceremonially attired and adorned, enters with an offering of food. She places the victuals on the altar, gazes awhile upon the image of the Lord and then begins to sing and to dance. This lasts a few minutes, after which she symbolically puts the Lord to bed and then makes her exit.

This ritual, until fairly recently, used to be a daily routine in the temple of Jagannath at Puri, in Orissa. A more or less similar observance also used to take place at noon every day. In both cases, it was performed by a woman of the *mahari* caste, the song was from Jayadeva's celebrated erotic-mystic poem, the *Geet Govinda*, and the dance was in a style peculiar to Orissa and which, for want of another appellation, is now simply known as Orissi.

The *Natya Shastra* classifies the *natya* art into four regional types: *Avanti*, *Dakshinatya*, *Panchali* and *Odhra-Magadhi*. According to the same text, the *Odhra-Magadhi* type was prevalent in *Anga*, *Vanga*, *Kalinga*, *Vatsa*, *Odhra*, *Magadha*, *Pundra* and certain other eastern regions of India. *Kalinga* and *Odhra* evidently refer to present Orissa. Thus it can be concluded that a *shastraic*, or classical, form of dance was prevalent in this part of India even 2,000 years ago, which is about the time the *Natya Shastra* was written. There is also reason to believe that the Orissi dance we find in Orissa today is a continuation of the art which was practised two millennia ago, for Orissi contains certain elements, such as adaptations of some



karanas, *hastas* and movements of the body and limbs, which are based on the Natya Shastra and which, for all we know, are not found in any other mode of *shastraic* dance today.

Coming to history, the earliest evidence we have of the existence of the art of dance in Orissa is of the 2nd century B.C., when the Jain King Kharavela ruled over this part of the country. A Brahmi inscription belonging to this period is found in the Hathi Gumphra cave at Udayagiri, in which it is stated that, in the third year of his reign, Kharavela, himself an expert dancer and musician, arranged a performance of *tandava* and *abhinaya* for the delectation of his people. Again, in the Rani Nahar cave, also in Udayagiri and belonging to the same period, there is a carved panel showing a king witnessing the performance of a dancing-girl and her accompanying musicians.

After Kharavela, for several centuries, there is no evidence of the existence of any form of dance in Orissa. But this can be overlooked, for even the political history of Orissa of this period is more or less a blank. The darkness is lifted, as far as history is concerned, in the 7th century A.D., and, as for dance, the curtain rises a century later, when we find a reference in an inscription in the temple of Brahmeswar at Bhubaneswar. According to this inscription, Kolavati, mother of the Kesari King Uddyota, built a temple to Shiva and dedicated several dancing-girls to it.

The temple dancing-girls, then, have been the earliest performers of the Orissi dance, and it certainly goes to their credit that for centuries they continued to be its chief repositories. The history of the Orissi dance, therefore, is largely the history of these *devadasis*, or *maharis*, as they are known in Orissa.

As mentioned already, the earliest reference to the dedication of dancing-girls in Orissa is in the form of an inscription belonging to the time of Udyotta Kesari, that is, to the 9th century A.D. The Kesari dynasty ruled for 3000 years; and though there is no evidence of this in history, tradition has it that one of the kings of this dynasty was known as Nritya Kesari, on account of his mastery of dance, and another as Gandharva Kesari, as he was an expert musician. The Kesari period saw the decline of Buddhism and the ascendancy of Brahmanism in Orissa, and this in a way paved the way for the emergence of the cult of Jagannath, or recognition of Vishnu-Krishna as Lord of the world, which was later to play a vital role in the shaping of the dance tradition of the *maharis*.

After the Kesari kings, the Ganga dynasty came to power. Chodagangadeva, who ruled from 1077 to 1147, was an illustrious person and the greatest ruler of Orissa of his time. He was well versed in the Vedas and other scriptures and proficient in most of the fine arts. He began the construction of the temple of Jagannath at Puri, and this temple soon came to occupy a unique position in the cultural and religious life of the people of Orissa. Chodagangadeva also employed *maharis* for service in this temple, and in this way he started a tradition, which continued well into our own time.

In 1194, forty-seven years after Chodagangadeva's death,



Anangabhimadeva became the ruler. He built several temples and he also constructed the *nata mandir*, the Hall of Dance, as an annexure to the temple of Jagannath at Puri. The *nata mandir* was intended for the performance of the *maharis* and musicians who were in the service of the temple. Jayadeva, the celebrated composer, also lived at this time, and the recital of his Geet Govinda later became an indispensable part of the rituals of the Jagannath temple, and this is a tradition which continues to this day. The Abhinaya Chandrika, which is considered to be the foremost *shastra* on Orissi dance, was also written at this time, and its author, Maheswara Mahapatra, adorned the court of King Anangabhimadeva. It is also recorded that, towards the close of the Ganga rule, King Rajarajadeva appointed, among others, twenty dancing-girls for service in the temple of Jagannath.

In 1435, Kapilendradeva established the rule of the Surya Vamsa—the Solar dynasty. Kapilendradeva seems to have been an enlightened ruler, as he was an outstanding scholar and writer. He introduced the custom of having the *maharis* dance twice every day in the temple of Jagannath, once at the time of *bhog*, or the Lord's midday meal, and again at the time of *barha singar*, or the Lord's ritual adornment before being put to bed. He also started the tradition of having the Geet Govinda sung as part of the daily ritual of the Jagannath temple.

Kapilendradeva was succeeded by his son Purushotamadeva. Purushotamadeva fought with Narasimha Salva of Kanchipuram, in the Tamil country, and defeated him and married his daughter Rupambika, who was renamed Padmavati. Padmavati, of her own accord, enlisted herself as a *mahari* to serve the Lord Jagannath, and it is recorded that, later, the temple honoured her by presenting her with a special *sari*. This shows that *maharis* were held in respect at the time and that a woman considered it a great honour to be permitted to serve the Lord as a dancing-girl.

Purushotamadeva died in 1497 and his son Prataparudradeva succeeded him. The new king gave a strict ruling that only the Geet Govinda and no other text should be recited in the Jagannath temple—a covenant which holds good to this day. The saint and singer Chaitanya also lived at this time and when he met Ramananda Pattanaik, the Governor of Rajmahendri, he brought about a lasting change in the latter's life. Ramananda Pattanaik was so impressed with Chaitanya's discourse that he forthwith relinquished the governorship and spent the rest of his life in serving the Lord Jagannath at Puri. He thereafter came to be known as Ramananda Raya. He was a musician and poet and he wrote the opera Jagannath Ballav, regarded as a minor classic. He is credited with having introduced *abhinaya* in the dance of the *maharis* and he was also the first to engage them to take part in drama; for, till then, the performers in dramas had been exclusively men and boys. The reign of Purushotamadeva did not achieve very much politically, but Vaishnavism as a religion became supreme and the cult of *bhakti* received a strong impetus.

By the end of the 16th century, Orissa had lost her independence and



came under the rule, successively, of the Bhois, Pathans, Moghuls, Marathas and, finally, the British. For over 300 years, the political state of the region remained in turmoil, which affected the religious, social and cultural aspects of life. Many times during this period the *seva padhatis*, or ritual services, connected with the temple of Jagannath, had to be suspended. From the time of Ramachandradeva, that is, about 1600 A.D., the *maharis*, who were originally intended for temples and gods alone, came to be employed in royal courts as well. From now on, the *maharis* ceased to be respected as *dasis* of the Lord and came to be associated with moral depravity, a situation which persists to this day.

The *maharis* are of two kinds: *bheetar-gani maharis* and *bahar-gani maharis*. The *bheetar-ganis*, who constitute an exclusive group, are permitted to enter the *barha deul*, or the *sanctum sanctorum* of the temple, and it is they who are privileged to dance and sing at the time of Barha Singar, or the Lord's ritual adornment before being put to bed. The *bahar-ganis*, on the other hand, are not permitted to enter the innermost sanctuary. They perform in the *nata mandir*, which is a part of the building, or near the *Garuda sthamba*, the ceremonial flagstaff, outside the temple. Whenever she has to dance, the *mahari* has to come to the temple after a purificatory bath. The *Rajaguru*, who officiates for the Raja, is always present at the place of performance. He stands near the dancer, holding a gold-mounted cane as the symbol of his authority. The *mahari* bows, first to the Lord and then to the *Rajaguru*, and it is only after this that she begins the dance. It is to be noted, though, that though the *mahari* system still continues in Orissa, the dance and the formalities and rituals associated with it today survive only in name.

During Ramachandradeva's rule, that is, in the early 17th century, a class of boys known as *gotipuas* also came into being. These boys dressed themselves as dancing-girls and danced in the temple and also for the general entertainment of the people. The *gotipuas* were supported by the *akhadas*, or gymnasia, which were established in several parts of the districts of Puri and Ganjam. Later, they were also encouraged by certain *zamindar* families of Orissa, some of whom maintained their own *gotipua* parties.

The dance of the *gotipuas* was more lively, and spectacular, for it was mostly in the form of *nrita* and was combined with the acrobatic element. The Orissi dance, as it developed in course of time, absorbed a good deal from the *gotipua* style.

From the time of Chodagandadeva, it has also been the practice for the *maharis* and *gotipuas* to dance on the occasion of the several annual festivals held in honour of the Lord Jagannath. Two of these festivals are of especial importance: the Chandan Jatra which takes place in Baisakh, or spring, and the Jhoolan Jatra which comes round in Shravan, or autumn. On the occasion of the Chandan Jatra, an image of Jagannath is taken to a tank which is about three miles from the temple, where it is ceremonially installed in a boat. The boat is then allowed to float in the tank, to whose water *chandan*, or sandalwood powder, has been added: two more boats, one carrying the



maharis and the other the *gotipuas*, are set afloat and kept in the vicinity of the Lord's boat. Then the *maharis* and *gotipuas*, by turns, entertain the Lord with song and dance. At the time of the Jhoolan Jatra, the Lord is put on a swing and the *maharis* and the *gotipuas* dance to provide entertainment for him.

In the matter of technique, the Orissi is a highly stylised dance. It is based, to some extent, on the most revered texts of Indian dancing and dramaturgy, the *Natya Shastra* and the *Abhinaya Darpana*, but it also makes use of technical elements which are found in certain Oriya manuscripts on the dance and related arts. There are scores of manuscripts of this kind and all of them were written between 100 and 300 years ago. The *Abhinaya Darpana Prakasha*, by Jadunath Sinha, the *Abhinaya Chandrika* by Rajamani Patra, and another *Abhinaya Chandrika*, by Maheswara Mahapatra, are of much importance. All these texts are in Sanskrit, but they are written in the Oriya script. The bulk of them are in the form of palm-leaf manuscripts, but there are also some which are on paper. Practically all the manuscripts are illustrated and it is indeed a remarkable feature of the Orissi tradition that it has a good deal of its technique recorded and preserved in this manner.

The Orissi dance has an exhaustive and thoroughly systematised technical vocabulary, embracing as it does every single aspect of the art. There are, for instance, four *pada bhedas*, or basic positions of the feet. Related to them are the *bhumis*, or the ways in which a dancer moves when performing. There are five basic *bhumis*, such as the *chauka*, in which the dancer moves along the perimeter of an imaginary square, and the *minadandi*, in which the dancer steps forward but with each step the foot traces a small arc. Then there are the *belis*, or principal body positions combined with the basic movements of the dance. There are eight basic *belis*, such as the *burha*, in which the feet move rapidly to the sides or front or back and at the same time the arms and hands trace circles in the air, and the *bhasa*, in which the dancer bends the body alternately to the right and to the left and the hands move gracefully, rather like the actions of a swimmer.

In the *nrita* aspect of the Orissi, much importance is given to the stance, the equilibrium of the body in the various poses and the strictly stylised manner of performing the movements. The most important elements in the Orissi *nrita* are the *bhangis* and *karanas*. *Bhangis* are the basic poses and movements of *nrita* in Orissi. In most of them the hip is deflected, the head inclined and the legs flexed at the knees. The *tribhanga*, or three-bend, attitude of Hindu sculpture and iconography has been well exploited in the *bhangis* of Orissi. Examples of *bhangis* are the *chauka*, in which the feet are separated and the legs bent so as to make the thighs almost horizontal, and the *natabara*, in which the body assumes the *tribhanga* pose with the left first resting on the left side of the waist and the closed right hand placed on the centre of the right thigh. The *karanas* or *thanis* are the basic dance-units of Orissi and they consist of a stance, a pose, hand-gestures and movement. When performing them, a number of *karanas* are generally strung together and there is a slight pause, and a pose, between consecutive *karanas*. A number of *karanas*



listed in the Natya Shastra are also used in the Orissi, but the manner of rendering them is not always identical. Examples of typical Orissi *karanas* are the *biraja*, in which the body is erect with one foot behind the other and the hands overhead, and the *mardala*, in which the dancer strikes an attitude of playing the drum. Also to the realm of *nritya* in Orissi belong the *bandhas*, which are brief passages of movement, pose and step and in which the body is sometimes contorted in extraordinary ways. On the whole quite difficult to perform, Bandha Nritya, or the dance based on *bandha* sequences, has always been the prerogative of the *gotipuas* and the *maharis* have had nothing to do with it.

Orissi carries *nritya* as well as *nritya*, and generally both these elements are found together, though in different measures, in the various items of the Orissi repertoire. The *bhava* is chaste and orthodox, with flashes of heightened dramatisation. The music is pure and classical, with graces of both the Hindustani and Karnatak systems, and the different compositions are intended to be performed in specific *ragas* and *talas*. The musical instruments used traditionally are the *mardala*—drum, *gini*—a pair of small cymbals, and the flute. Nowadays, the violin and the *veena* or *sitar* are also freely employed. The language of the songs is Sanskrit or Oriya. Though the songs of several medieval and recent Oriya poets are employed for *abhinaya* in Orissi, the pride of place given to Jayadeva's Geet Govinda remains unrivalled. Excerpts from this poem are rendered through items such as Sabhinaya Nritya and Ishta Deva Bandana and, apart from these, a favourite piece is the Dasavatara, which constitutes the opening piece in Jayadeva's work.

As we have seen, Orissi is a dance which has from the outset been wedded to religion. It is not surprising, therefore, that most of the items in its repertoire have a devotional bias. Actually, in the Orissi tradition there was no such thing as a repertoire. There was only one long number, lasting about forty minutes, which began with an invocation and ended with a climax of pure rhythmic dance. It is only since about two decades that this long sequence has been broken up, and the different items thus created are now considered to constitute the repertoire of the art.

When presented in the accepted manner, a performance of Orissi begins with Bhumi Pranam, in which the dancer ceremoniously offers salutation to the Earth. This is followed by Bighnaraj Puja. In this a Sanskrit *shloka* in praise of Ganapati is recited and the dancer does simple *bhava* to express the meaning of the words. Next comes Batu Nritya, a dance offering in honour of Batuka Bhairava or the Lord Shiva. In this dance, there are alternate sequences of *nritya* and *nritya*. The *nritya* is presented in the form of *belis* and *bhangis* and *karanas*, while the *nritya* mainly concerns itself with showing, through gesture and mime, the different rituals connected with the worship of Batuka. There is no song or recitation to accompany this dance, but a refrain of rhythmic syllables is chanted throughout.

The Batu Nritya is followed by the Ishta Deva Bandana. In this a Sanskrit verse in praise of any deity is sung and its meaning shown through expressional dance. The next item, known as Swara Pallabi Nritya, gives equal



importance to *nrita*, *nritya*, *raga* and *tala*. The dance begins with diverse sequences of *nrita*, which are accompanied by the singing, in *raga*, of patterns of musical notes or of rhythmic syllables, and later a song is sung and its meaning conveyed through *bhava*.

In the next item, known as Sabhinaya Nritya, a song based on the *sringara rasa*, or erotic mood, and pertaining generally to the Radha-Krishna theme is sung and projected through *bhava*. Excerpts from the Geet Govinda are commonly used in this dance, and some of the Oriya lyric writers of the past whose songs are used from time to time are Banamali Das, Upendra Bhanja, Kabisurya Baladeva and Gopalakrishna Pattanaik. The closing item in a set performance of the Orissi is known as Tarijham or Natangi. This consists of sequences of pure *nrita* performed in a fast tempo and accompanied by the recitation of patterns of rhythmic syllables which generally begin with the phrase 'tarijham'.

In very recent years, however, a somewhat new and different repertoire has been devised for the Orissi stage. In this the performance opens with *Mangalacharana*, an invocatory piece, rendered as a ritual offering, in praise of a deity like Saraswati or Ganesha. Then comes Batu Nritya, which has already been explained. This is followed by Pallavi. Pallavi means elaboration, and here it applies to the dance as well as to the music which accompanies it. The rendering carries dance passages of lyrical grace and charm, punctuated with stylised poses reminiscent of temple carvings. Pallavis are set in classical *ragas*, like Saveri, Mohana, Gaurh, Kalyani and Bajrakanti. After Pallavi appear two or three *abhinaya* pieces, mostly from the Geet Govinda. At times, between such pieces, another Pallavi is introduced. The performance concludes with Mokshya, a composition in *nrita*, which carries crisp and tightly-knit passages of dance and music which build up to a crescendo of rare aesthetic delight.

Details about the costume, ornaments and make-up for the Orissi dance are given in a number of ancient texts, in particular in the Abhinaya Chandrika, of Maheswara Mahapatra. The dress of the *maharis* consists of a silk sari of bright colour one end of which is gathered in the front and made to hang like an apron. Over this is tied a cord with tassels or is worn a fancy girdle-belt made of silver. The blouse is also of colourful material and has its arms and front studded with sequins and stones. *Gotipuas* too use the sari and blouse, but they do not have the apron-like arrangement in front. Both *maharis* and *gotipuas* deck themselves from head to toe with a rich variety of ornaments, all of silver. A halo of white flowers is added to the head, and flowers are also sometimes woven into the braid. The face is generally decorated with spots which follow the line of the eyebrows and extend to the cheeks, a vermilion mark is planted in the centre of the forehead, and the eyes are darkened with an unguent. The palms and soles are coloured red.

An extension of the Orissi is found in another dance of Orissa, the Sabda Swarapata, which today survives, albeit in a precarious condition, in



the district of Sambalpur. The performers in this are all men, and the style is *tandava*, masculine. The principal items in the tradition are the Sabdas which, like the Kavita Torhas in Kathak, carry passages of *nrita* and *nritya* and are rendered in a fast tempo to the accompaniment of vocal recitation and the playing of the drum. The most common Sabdas are those dedicated to Shiva, Durga and Ganesha, and they all dwell on the heroic aspect of the deity concerned. Essentially a sacred dance, intended to be performed in certain temples, the Sabda Swarapata entails considerable involvement, both physical and emotional, on the part of the dancers, so much so, that, often, the performers reach a state of trance and collapse at the conclusion of a presentation.

A striking feature of the Orissi dance is that it has found extensive representation in the ornamental temple sculpture of Orissa. This fact is of more importance than is commonly realised, for the extent to which and the accuracy with which Orissi dance poses have been used to adorn Orissan temples are truly remarkable. The massive temple of Konarak, raised in honour of the Sun God, and the numerous Shaivite shrines at Bhubaneswar, are particularly rich in carvings based on the Orissi tradition. It would, in fact, be no exaggeration to say that if one were persistent enough, one would find the greater part of the vocabulary of the Orissi dance preserved in stone. And this attribute, alone, should suffice to put Orissi in a class by itself among the traditions of classical dance in India.



CHAPTER FOUR

Kuchipudi

The dance dramas of Andhra Pradesh, known as the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka*, are recorded in sculptures and manuscripts of the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries. This was the period when the main goal of the great saints and gurus was to seek union with the Divine by meditation, incantation, mantras and retreats, both in the temples and in the countryside.

Near Warangal, the ancient capital of the Kakatiyas (now part of Andhra), are Hanamkonda, in whose Thousand Pillared Temple, built in about the twelfth century by Chalukya kings, there are superb carvings and sculptures that rival those of Belur and Halebid in Karnataka state, and Palampet, whose incredible Ramappa Temple has a glorious profusion of life-like sculptures. Ceilings and pillars depict elaborate scenes from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*: dancing girls in erotic poses appear side by side with gods and goddesses, the attendant musicians and acrobats performing a *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* type of dance drama not unlike the *Krishnattam* and *Kathakali* of Kerala.

Whereas the ancient dance dramas of Kerala were kept alive by its temple priests and the local people, those of Ramappa and Kazipet (also near Warangal), ancient sites of Dravidian culture*, disappeared. It seems likely that the later *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Karnataka which is known today as the *Yakshagana*[†] was influenced by the dance dramas and dance style depicted in the Ramappa sculptures. The *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* of Tamil Nadu[‡], with its Telugu speech (the old language of Andhra) is an obvious continuation of the ancient tradition.

In the nineteenth century, two Telugu-speaking Brahmins of Andhra, Tirtha Narayana Yati and Sidhyendra Yogi, master and pupil respectively, were inspired by the *Geeta Govinda* stories of Jayadeva which are built round the legendary life and exploits of Krishna, the Blue God. From a study of these ancient texts and of the *Bhagavata Mela Nataka* technique and style that had been handed down, Sidhyendra Yogi codified everything into his own dance drama technique. He is said to have had a vision of the Blue God, after which he composed the sacred dance drama, *Parijatapaharana* (The Sacred Flower Dance). It is also said that with the performing of this dance Sidhyendra Yogi was to attain spiritual liberation and salvation—as indeed would all those participating in or witnessing it.

In order to maintain the purity, chastity and the highest spiritual dedication for the performance of this particular drama—at a time when female dancers were in disrepute (see Introduction)—he chose to recruit a group of young Brahmin boys whom he considered to be fit physically and morally to perform. A vow was taken from them that, when they grew older, they would carry on the purest traditions of the art and would teach their sons, grandsons and thus to all future generations. This is how the *Parijatapaharana* and the many other dance dramas have survived to this day in the village of Kuchipudi, formerly known as Kuchelapuram, on the east coast of Andhra, north of Madras.



* See Chapter 1 (page 10)

† See Chapter 9

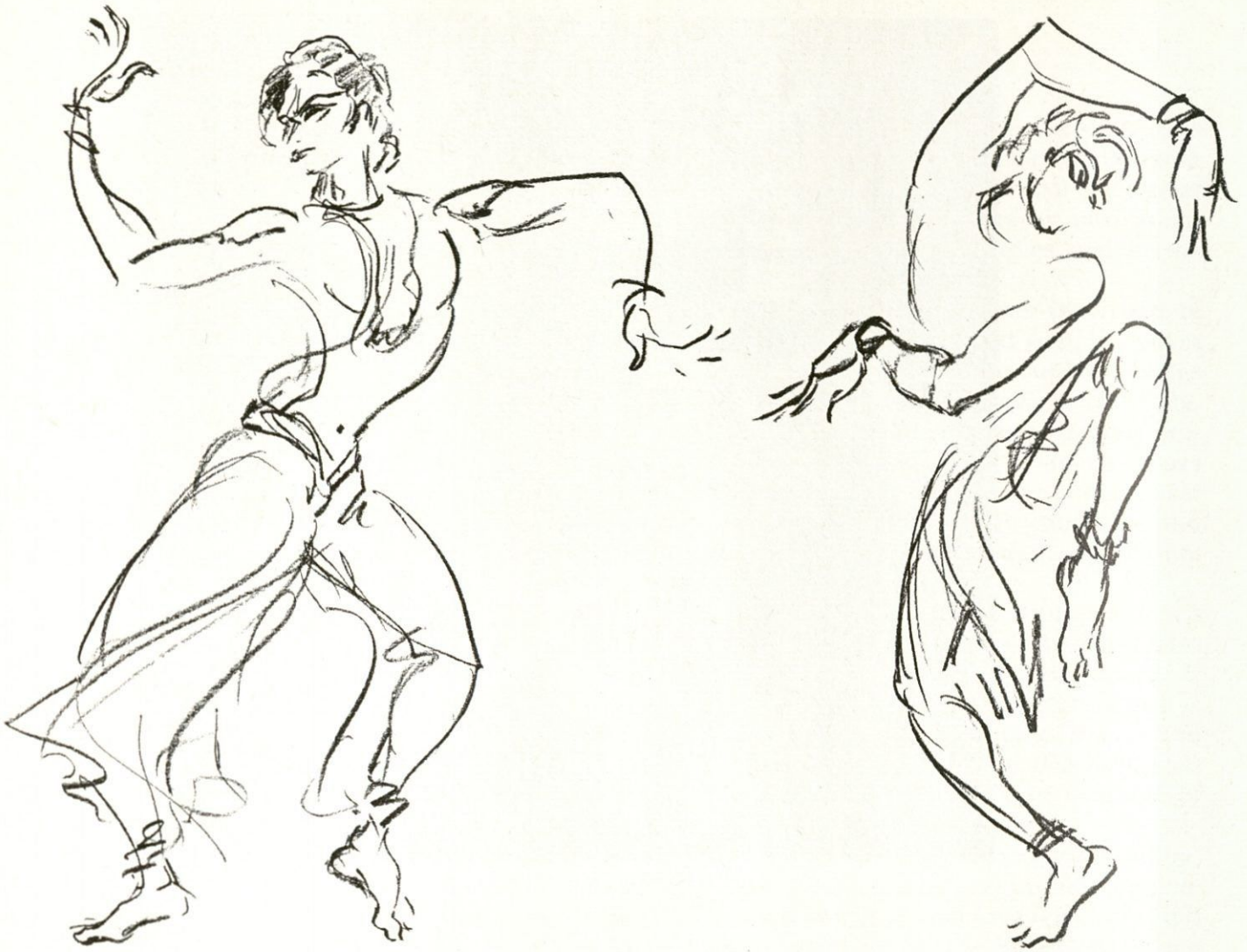
‡ See Chapter 5



Like the *Kathakali* dance dramas of Kerala, the *Kuchipudi* dance dramas are performed in the open air and only at night. The musicians, including drummers, play an overture. This is followed by an amusing dance performed by a youth wearing the mask of Ganesha, the elephant-headed god, 'who removes all obstacles'. Both these items precede the dance drama chosen for the night. All the dancers are male, female characters being danced by young men. At this point, there should be mention of Vedantan Satyam, the female impersonator in the *Kuchipudi* school of dancing. He gives a superb performance in terms of expression, gesture and rhythm, unsurpassed even by Balasaraswathi and other gifted dancers of the *Bharata Natya* school of Tamil Nadu.

Performances of *Kuchipudi* dance drama generally follow the same pattern. Here is a typical programme:

- 1 *Puja Nrtya* This dance invocation in *Kuchipudi* style is a salutation to the stage.
- 2 *Jatiswaram* A sequence of pure dance in which skilful timing, rhythm and great speed are characteristics of head, arm and foot movements.



- 3 *Tillana* A very seductive dance to a lilting melody. Expression, gesture and rhythm, combined with breathtaking speed, require great technical skill from the dancer. He covers the stage with a seeming ease and grace which belie the effort and discipline required.
- 4 *Kannakole* Musicians and dancers combine in fast-changing rhythms, with much exciting footwork.
- 5 *Krishna Śabdham* This is a delightful story of the loves of Krishna. A Nayika (one of Krishna's devotees) is sitting in a garden, making up her face, anointing herself with sandalwood paste and adorning herself with jewels. She is suddenly aware that the Blue God, Krishna, stands nearby. She seeks to entice him with seductive eyes and inviting lips. She weaves a garland for him and, rising, dances for him.
- 6 *Manduka Śabdham* This dance tells the story of a bewitched frog, confined to a pond. Ravana, the Demon King of Sri Lanka (Ceylon),



Three sections from the solo dance *Dasavatara*, which depicts the ten incarnations of Vishnu—the tenth being Maitreya, the future Saviour of Mankind.

looks into the pond and realises that the frog which leaps from side to side is really a princess. He utters powerful magic spells and the ugly frog emerges from the pond as the beautiful Mandodari. She joins Ravana and is carried off to Sri Lanka to reign as his queen.

- 7 *Dasavatara Śabdham* This depicts the ten incarnations of Vishnu, right up to the coming of Maitreya, the future saviour of Mankind. So quick are the changes from one incarnation to another that the audience must follow the movements of the dance with great alertness.

(All the *śabdams* tell a story, using expressions of the face, gestures of the hands and rhythmic patterns of the feet. Movements may be round the stage, or with face and hands only when the dancer is seated.)

- 8 *Bhama Kalapam* The story of the celestial Parijata tree, during which the Sacred Flower Dance is performed.