

**Victory of a Dream:  
Reimagining *The Nutcracker* in Classical Indian Dance**

Arthi Devarajan and Harshita Mruthinti Kamath

ABSTRACT

This article is a presentation of ethnographic data about *Swapna Vijayam*, a classical Indian dance ballet choreographed by dancer Sasikala Penumarthi in the Kuchipudi style. Staged in Atlanta, GA in December 2007, *Swapna Vijayam* was an adaptation of *The Nutcracker* into Kuchipudi, using traditional Indian aesthetics in its dance techniques, musical scores, and sets. The dancers who participated in *Swapna Vijayam* reflect on their experience adapting a Western story to Indian dance, interpreting it as an infusion of cross-cultural aesthetic and narrative values into their traditions. Other participants in the ballet, including the music composer, set designers, and audience members also comment on the way that *Swapna Vijayam* entailed a negotiation of practices of imagination, in an effort to translate culture and build social capital within the Hindu community and larger circles in Atlanta.

***American Imagination of Dance: The Significance of The Nutcracker***

**T**he characteristic drone of a South Indian violin resonates in a packed auditorium in Atlanta, Georgia on the rainy night of December 15, 2007.<sup>1</sup> A male voice fills the darkened space, giving praise to the art form of Kuchipudi, a classical dance style that originates from the

South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. After a two-minute melodic interval, the rhythmic sounds of the *mridangam*, the South Indian drum, and the *nattuvangam*, brass cymbals, reverberate throughout the auditorium. Then, the vocalist sings a song-like prose, which names the ballet about to be performed as *Swapna Vijayam*. The curtain slowly rises on the spotlight of a lone figure, the magician Mayura, who is writing at his desk. Mayura suddenly looks up to see a Nutcracker doll sitting atop his workspace. Saddened by the curse placed on his nephew, Sundara Rakumara, to reside in the form of this doll, Mayura is suddenly struck by an idea to help save his nephew and rushes offstage to put his plan into place. Thus begins *Swapna Vijayam*, an adaptation of the classical Western ballet, *The Nutcracker*, into the classical Indian dance form of Kuchipudi.

If we turn to the broader American context, *The Nutcracker* arguably is ballet, to many families living in America. Composed by the Russian writer, Tchaikovsky, between 1891-1892, *The Nutcracker* depicts the fairy-tale dream of the young Clara Stahlbaum. The ballet begins with the Stahlbaum family's celebrations on Christmas Eve, during which Clara is given a Nutcracker toy by her godfather, Herr Drosselmeyer. When Clara falls asleep that night, she dreams that the Nutcracker toy comes to life and saves her from the clutches of the evil Mouse King and his band of unruly soldiers. The Nutcracker, after killing the Mouse King, transforms into a prince and escorts Clara through the Land of the Sugar Plum Fairies. Clara awakens from her dream in front of the Christmas tree in her home, with the Nutcracker toy in her hands. Notably, this fairy-tale ballet is often the first and most memorable and impressive foray into classical performance arts for many young children. *The Nutcracker* serves as a springboard for youngsters interested in dance and ballet; for dancers trained in ballet, it is often a measuring stick of their progress and education in ballet, as they are cast and recast into various roles based on their improvement in skill, year after year.

Interestingly, dance scholar Jennifer Fisher notes that although the *The Nutcracker* has captured the American imagination over the years, it lacked a similar prestige in Russia at the time of its production. After the initial staging of *The Nutcracker* in 1892, some critics praised Tchaikovsky's music as "astonishingly rich," while others viewed the ballet as being "produced primarily with children for children" with "precisely nothing" to contribute to "the artistic fate" of ballet.<sup>2</sup> Despite these critiques, when *The Nutcracker* shifted to the American stage in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it quickly gained popularity. Fisher attributes this trend to two reasons: first, "its ability to make the rarefied ballet world feel more accessible, and [second], perhaps most important, its connection to Christmas."<sup>3</sup> Fisher describes that soon after its introduction to the American stage:

*The Nutcracker* found its place among many other secular holiday narratives that became hallmarks of the season, among them *A Christmas Carol*, *Charlie Brown's Christmas*, and *It's a Wonderful Life*. Like the ballet, these performances, in their main incarnations, are now widely associated with "the spirit of Christmas" without making reference to the religious aspect of the holiday.<sup>4</sup>

Fisher also states that "with its joyful Yuletide atmosphere and its emphasis on modern delights,

*The Nutcracker* quickly became part of the modern North American Christmas, as if it had always been there. In that way, it is an ‘invented tradition.’”<sup>5</sup> Whether due to its thematic focus on Christmas, or its ability to be seen as a new tradition, *The Nutcracker* undoubtedly holds a special place in the contemporary American imagination of dance.

In light of the imaginative significance of *The Nutcracker* in American dance and holiday seasonal culture, it is perhaps not surprising that Sasikala Penumarthi, Atlanta-based practitioner of the Indian classical dance form known as Kuchipudi, was moved to imagine *The Nutcracker* in a new idiom. But certainly, the cultural and religious context differences between Western classical ballet and Kuchipudi dance, which hails from South India, are vast. In December 2007, years of painstaking work, imaginative shifts, contextual adaptation and practices of community engagement came to fruition, when Sasikala presented her first original production, *Swapna Vijayam*: an adaptation of the *Nutcracker Suite* into the Kuchipudi dance form. In this article, we will explore the many conversations, thought-processes, meticulous planning and final execution of this landmark performance, through the voices and minds of several individuals involved: Sasikala Penumarthi, choreographer and director of *Swapna Vijayam*; Reneeta Basu and Akhila Takkallapalli, two dancers who performed and assisted in teaching other students; Subhashini Krishnamurthy, the creator of the musical score for *Swapna Vijayam*; P.V. Rao, set designer and production support person; and Barbara Patterson, professor of Religion at Emory University and a classical Western ballet dancer who was audience to *Swapna Vijayam*. As graduate students at Emory University, and also as trained Indian classical dancers, we had the opportunity to interview the choreographers, participants, production staff, and audience members involved with *Swapna Vijayam*.<sup>6</sup> We hope that the following examination of *Swapna Vijayam* will not only expand dance scholarship on the *The Nutcracker*, but also diversify discussions on American religious practices, as well as studies of Indian and Hindu communities in the American diaspora.

### ***“Secular Christmas” and the “American Christmas Imaginary”: Critical Terms for Representing the Symbolic Capital of American Christmas Culture***

Before discussing the details of *Swapna Vijayam* and its reimagination of *The Nutcracker* tradition, a brief exploration of American Christmas celebrations might be helpful in providing historical context for the holiday’s religious and cultural symbolism. In the United States, the phrase “secular Christmas” is often used to indicate the public, non-denominational celebration of the holiday season – referring to such diverse cultural practices as the public display of lights, the commercial and market-based aspects of Christmastime, and certain music, films, images and stories related to Christmas. “Secular Christmas” is often placed in opposition to “religious Christmas,” which indicates celebrations such as the special worship services, masses, Biblical narratives and symbols that highlight the Christian story of Jesus Christ’s birth as the central focus of the holiday. While the distinction is understandable as a part of general discourse, we wish to

attend to two major issues inherent in this Christmas-related language.

Firstly, the distinction between “secular” and “religious” Christmas celebrations does not easily accommodate instances or phenomena wherein the secular and religious symbols may intersect. While at a scholarly level, one may be inclined to categorize certain Christmas cultural phenomena as either one or the other, not all individuals living in the American context may see things according to such a dichotomy. For example, a display of holiday lights and illuminated yard sculptures put on annually at a neighborhood home includes without explanation Santa Claus and the eight reindeer, a prominent Nativity scene, an enormous illuminated crown encircling the house’s roof, a yard sculpture of Snoopy and Woodstock atop a Christmas-themed doghouse, and a freestanding, human-height menorah.<sup>7</sup> To discuss “secular” and “religious” Christmas is to create a dichotomy, and apply it indiscriminately to a world where individuals often engage in celebrations infused with symbols from numerous sources.

Secondly, we are concerned that the words “secular Christmas” may be interpreted to mean a Christmas devoid of a meaning, or of significance, magic, symbol, ethics, or a greater consciousness that infuses individuals’ lives, connecting them to something greater than themselves. Such an interpretation would be a regrettable thing, for although “secular Christmas” and its component elements may not directly reference the birth of Christ or other Christian narratives thought to represent Christmas’ origins, there are still important meanings and significances attributed to the components of “secular Christmas” that compose an identifiable religious system. In *Christmas in America: A History*, American cultural historian Penne Restard provides a comprehensive review of Christmas practices, celebrations, cultural shifts and trends from the colonial period till the twentieth century. In a discussion of contemporary American Christmas culture, Restard writes:

Nothing is more striking about Christmas in the twentieth century than, as secularization and an increased popular and legal recognition of religious pluralism have helped denude public life of a common religious experience, how Christmas has come to function as the last widely celebrated public recognition of the miraculous. Almost alone, the keeping of this holiday provides a communal and calendrical touchstone of the nation’s faith, hope, and moral aspiration, a national moment of harmony and transcendence.<sup>8</sup>

Scholar of geography Patrick McGreevy echoes Restard’s views when he writes about the unique quality of Christmas to reorder landscapes both physically and symbolically through public seasonal displays, orienting all aspects of American society, from the marketplace to private family life, toward its centrality as a national holiday.<sup>9</sup> McGreevy also discusses a full repertoire of Christmas stories, films and other media depictions which emerged from the 1930’s onward, including the children’s story, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1939), the famous Bing Crosby song “White Christmas” (1942), and holiday films such as *Holiday Inn* (1942), *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) and *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* (1947).<sup>10</sup> These films and media depictions constitute a repertoire of Christmas images and narratives, of which *The Nutcracker* would also be a part. While not connected to Christian narratives or values directly, these stories do in fact contain values and symbolic capital, promoting ideals such as humanitarianism, childhood joy and innocence, and a

utopian vision of the domestic sphere – items which comprise an important system of meaning.<sup>11</sup>

The work of both Catherine Albanese and David Chidester is useful in thinking about American Christmas as a religious system that carries meaning and symbolic weight in mainstream American culture, even independent of Christmas' Christian background. Catherine Albanese's essay, "Religion and American Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay," discusses the ways that American popular culture and popular religion have been conceived in the academy over the years; she contends that popular religious practices and traditions should not be regarded as a subsidiary, "primitive," or "low" form of religion, to be regarded in opposition to "high," ecclesiastic, or "official" religions. Rather, popular religious culture demands alternative analytic models, to fully understand the symbolic power and import that these traditions carry in human experience.<sup>12</sup> David Chidester's essay, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock and Roll," develops Albanese's discussion by pointing to the ways in which "secular" concepts or systems, such as American baseball, the soft drink Coca-Cola, and rock and roll music, carry tremendous symbolism and order communities, sacred space and time for American lives.<sup>13</sup> Chidester points to three ways in which baseball can be regarded as a "church" of sorts; the sport of baseball involves tradition, heritage and collective memory; it creates and orders an extended community of baseball enthusiasts who "attend the same church;" and thirdly, it has a sense of normality which orders time and space, creating a familiar and almost domestic environment for its fold.<sup>14</sup>

Chidester's model of baseball may easily extend to American non-Christian holiday traditions, as these encompass similar elements. While holiday traditions such as decorating trees, attending seasonal performances, and revisiting a Christmas repertoire of film and media resources may not involve Christian belief or narratives per se, they often involve heritage and collective memory, draw together broad communities, and fabricate a sense of marked time, space, and familiarity for those who partake of them. As a result, we regard American Christmas traditions not as "secular Christmas," but as a system of heightened meaning, symbol and community. Therefore, we would like to suggest new term for this milieu of traditions: "the American Christmas imaginary," to supplant the term "secular Christmas," as a measure of acknowledging the network of value and meaning that these seasonal traditions and narratives provide to American culture and lives. With this notion of the American Christmas imaginary in mind, we now turn to Kuchipudi dance and to the reimagination of *The Nutcracker* within this Indian classical performance tradition.

### ***An Introduction to Kuchipudi Dance***

Before we turn to discussing *Swapna Vijayam per se*, some background on Kuchipudi dance might be helpful to understand its context. All classical Indian dance forms are historically linked to Hinduism through their intersections with Hindu sacred texts, social institutions, myth, and symbol. A primary link is the relationship of Indian dance and aesthetics to the *Natyashastra*, a

text dated between the second century BCE and the sixth century CE. The *Natyashastra* discusses the various dramatic arts and aesthetic theory, and is often credited to the Hindu sage Bharata, who wrote the text while in communication with the Hindu deity Shiva, regarded as the creator of dance itself.<sup>15</sup> Dance was developed through temple and courtly culture, as local Hindu kings and empires patronized communities of local artists. The association of Indian classical dance forms with Hinduism continued through the development of devotional poetry and music from the fourteenth century onwards; these compositions, drawing on stories and figures from Hindu mythology, often formed the basis of dance choreography. Contemporary iterations of classical Indian dance styles are predominantly the product of twentieth-century stylistic reforms that developed in response to religious and nationalist shifts of consciousness, which themselves were responses to colonialism and the Indian Independence movement.<sup>16</sup>

*Kuchipudi* is an Indian classical performance genre, with origins in the temple and court cultures of the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.<sup>17</sup> Derived from a performative genre called *Yakshagana*, a form of devotional story-acting and folk theater, today Kuchipudi is recognized as a high art, and is studied and performed by Indian and diasporic communities worldwide.<sup>18</sup> The dance style incorporates three main categories of dramatic movement: *nritta*, or fast-paced, angular movements of the arms, legs and torso; *nritya*, or graceful, lyrical gestures that convey a story; and *natya*, or dramatic postures and expressions of the face and body, used to depict emotion.<sup>19</sup> Movements are set to the rhythms and lyrics of *Carnatic* music, which dates back to approximately the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries CE. The verses of *Carnatic* music, often written in Sanskrit, or in the South Indian languages of Tamil or Telugu, are primarily devotional in nature, and are composed around a highly codified and legislated system of *raga* (melodic structures) and *tala* (rhythmic patterns). For most communities of Kuchipudi dancers in the United States, dance classes are conducted in temples or Indian community centers, in teachers' homes or rented class spaces.<sup>20</sup>

Like in so many other classical art forms, Indian classical dance education and performance is itself a culture and mode of learning that differs from other pedagogical forms. While subtle stylistic elements may vary with individual dance teachers, nearly all schools of Kuchipudi dance emphasize a continuous and regular pedagogical exposure to the dance form. Teachers have certain demands and expectations placed upon them within their respective dance schools in regards to the training of students; in the U.S., some teachers expect to meet their students weekly, if not several times during a week for classes and rehearsals. Most classical Indian dance teachers also encourage students to practice dance at home, outside of structured class time.

The trajectory of dance education celebrates or acknowledges certain milestones in a young dancer's life and in the building of a set of skills. Most dance instructors place authority in an established order of dance techniques and pieces, which has been taught and recognized by their gurus, and the gurus before them. The pedagogy of classical Indian dance begins with the smallest and least complex unit of dance, *adavus* (basic steps), and progresses to more *jatis* and *tirmanams* – combinations, where several *adavus* are strung together as a cohesive unit. Once the student

has mastered both the execution of basic steps and certain step combinations, a teacher will begin to instruct the student in dance pieces that build sequentially in their degree of difficulty and skill-level; along the way, the student is exposed to *abhinaya*, or categories of facial and gestural expressions to connote emotion and narrate a story. Atlanta-based dancer Sasikala Penumarthi teaches *Brahmanjali*, an invocatory piece, to her fledgling students as a primer in learning a finite dance piece. She continues with items such as the *Jatisvaram*, a dance piece that focuses on technical skill, and *Koluvaitiva*, an item that praises the South Indian god Venkateswara, to help her dancers gain expertise in the dance form. The culmination of this trajectory, and often the most highly celebrated level attained by a dancer, is a confident and skilled performance onstage for a public audience, such as in a *Ranga Pravesam* or *Arangetram* – the event of a dancer’s first solo debut onstage, the performance of a full program of Kuchipudi dance with all its compliment items. The *Ranga Pravesam* and other public presentations of dance are seen as the culmination of a dancer’s training, and are often invoked by dance teachers and parents discursively, symbolically, and imagistically, as a motivating goal for young dancers in the early part of their training, and as a way to encourage continued practice and investment in the learning of dance.<sup>21</sup> Notably, many of Sasikala’s senior dancers have either finished or are working on completing their *Ranga Pravesam*.

Perhaps what Kuchipudi is most well-known for in the world of classical Indian dance is its highly dramatic and collaborative nature. Kuchipudi places emphasis on the production of dance-dramas, sometimes referred to as ballets, in which dancers play various roles as they narrate South Asian stories. Often these are stories that are highly recognizable to their audiences, such as episodes from the life of the Hindu deity Krishna, or the stories surrounding the wedding alliance of a Hindu god and goddess. The emphasis on dance-drama in Kuchipudi has been bolstered most notably by the work of Sri Vempati Chinna Satyam, a world-renowned exponent of Kuchipudi dance, and founder of the Kuchipudi Art Academy, Chennai, India.<sup>22</sup> Chinna Satyam is the master choreographer of some of Kuchipudi’s most recognizable and intricate dance ballets, such as *Srinivasa Kalyanam*, the wedding of Vishnu (in his form of Srinivasa), and *Haravilasam*, a string of tales about Lord Shiva. Chinna Satyam made a unique and groundbreaking move when he shifted the imaginative focus of Kuchipudi dance-drama from religious tales to secular ones; his landmark production, *Chandalika*, was a stage adaptation of a story by Rabindranath Tagore that focused on issues of caste divisions and social hierarchy in Indian society. Sasikala Penumarthi, a premier disciple of Chinna Satyam for over twenty years, has staged several of his ballets, including *Srinivasa Kalyanam* and *Chandalika*, in the Atlanta area.

With this brief review of the background of Kuchipudi dance, several points emerge as noteworthy for the 2007 production of *Swapna Vijayam*. While Kuchipudi dance is connected to some degree to the stories, practices, and histories of Hindu culture, there have been instances in the past in which it has been used for non-religious or secular themes. The emphasis on storytelling and dramatic expression in Kuchipudi dance, as well as the ballet-like qualities of Kuchipudi dance

dramas, are in line with the types of performative movement necessary to convey the fairytale stories and dream-like sequences of *The Nutcracker*. In the following portions of this article, we will share the thoughts of the individuals involved in the production, and the ways in which all levels of production provided innovative and syncretic contexts for imaginative practice.

### ***Effecting Imaginative Shifts: The Transformation of The Nutcracker into Swapna Vijayam***

In 1992, Kuchipudi artist Sasikala Penumarthi attended a performance of *The Nutcracker* at the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia.<sup>23</sup> Following the show, Sasikala's husband, Ravi, asked whether it would be possible to stage a similar ballet within the Kuchipudi genre. Sasikala, an accomplished Kuchipudi artist and lead dancer for numerous productions in her guru's dance school, had just moved from India to America in 1991 as a new bride, and was still in the process of establishing herself as a professional dancer and member of the Indian community in the Atlanta area. Because of her desire to become more firmly established as a classical artist in the community before taking on such a non-traditional project, she pushed Ravi's suggestion to the back of her mind. Then, in 1996, Sasikala and Ravi attended another performance of *The Nutcracker*, during which Ravi again raised the possibility of a Kuchipudi adaptation. By this time, Sasikala's life in the United States, as well as her dance career, felt more established; she had even staged major dance-dramas for audiences in the Atlanta area. However, the ballets she had directed were adapted from the productions of her teacher in India, Chinna Satyam. The task of creating a Kuchipudi ballet from scratch, which included commissioning the script, composing the music, choreographing the dances, and designing the costumes, was one Sasikala had never undertaken before.

Despite her initial hesitations, in 2000 Sasikala raised the idea of a Kuchipudi *Nutcracker* to Indraganti Srikanth Sarma, a famous writer of Kuchipudi ballet scripts, who was visiting Atlanta at the time. With the help of her husband and Dr. P.V. Rao, a physics professor at Emory University and patron of Telugu language poetry and other arts in Atlanta, Sasikala provided Sarma with a video of the Western ballet, along with a written summary, to help with the script-writing process. A full two years later, when Sasikala questioned Sarma about the progress of the script, he suggested abandoning the project altogether because it was too difficult to compose, and urged her to try an alternative story. Sasikala remained firm in her decision to stage *The Nutcracker* and insisted that the purpose of this project was to "bring Kuchipudi into mainstream American culture."<sup>24</sup> During the next two years, the script was created, revised, and discussed between Sarma in India, and Sasikala and Ravi in America.

The final product, although adhering to the plot of the Western ballet, included unique features from the Kuchipudi tradition. One characteristic of the Kuchipudi genre, as well as *Yakshagana* dance forms more broadly, is the *patra praveshadaravu*, in which a lead character announces his or her entrance through a solo dance piece that includes both expressive aspects (*natya*) and tech-



nical movements (*nritta*). Sarma retained this feature by allowing the royal family to announce themselves in this way in the opening act of the drama. In a further attempt to incorporate Indian and Western worlds, in the final version of the script in 2005, Sarma decided to name the ballet *Swapna Vijayam*, or “Victory of a Dream,” thereby giving the Kuchipudi *Nutcracker* a distinctively Indian title.

When we interviewed Sasikala in her home in April 2008, she described to us the development of the *Swapna Vijayam* production, giving special emphasis to the music and dance choreography. With the help of Indian classical vocalist Subhashini Krishnamurthy, Sasikala focused her choreography efforts on both music and dance simultaneously. She described the imaginative process of choreography by stating that “as [Subhashini] was choreographing each song, my mind started working [on] how to choreograph the dance.... I was totally picturizing [sic] each scene as she was composing each song.” Following the dance choreography, Sasikala, along with her two senior students, Reneeta Basu and Indira Sarma, videotaped all of the dance items for later training purposes. When describing her experience with this new videotaping technique, Sasikala admitted, “I never watched the video when I was teaching [before]. Never watched.... Most of the shows, I remember every single role. But this was [from] scratch to me, everything. Right from the music, the choreography, setting up, lighting, setting, everything.” This use of videotaping, a choreography technique which had never been utilized prior to this production, as well as the innovations in script and costume, suggests the imaginative processes that were necessary to the creation of the *Swapna Vijayam* production.



Sasikala Penumarthy, director and choreographer of the *Swapna Vijayam* ballet, enacting the lead role of *Swapna*.

In addition to interviewing Sasikala, we spoke with Reneeta Basu about her experiences with *Swapna Vijayam*. Reneeta, a graduate student of osteopathy living in Atlanta, played one of the lead dancing dolls in the first scene; she also played an integral part in helping Sasikala with the dance choreography as a whole. When describing the choreography experience, Reneeta revealed her amazement at Sasikala’s imaginative capabilities.

This is the first drama that Aunty literally did everything herself, [including] the choreography. That was *huge*, for her to choreograph so much. And I have a newfound respect for her, because for her to choreograph so much in such a short amount of time, it’s *remarkable*. It’s amazing. And she comes up with choreography like this [snaps fingers]. It’s literally, she’ll just hear it a few times and all of a sudden she starts moving to the music.

It's amazing to work with someone like that, you can't believe your eyes that someone like that actually exists.<sup>25</sup>

We also interviewed Akhila Takkallapalli, a young professional in her mid-20's, who played one of the leading roles in the ballet, the magician Mayura. The character of Mayura is based on Clara's godfather, Herr Drosselmeyer, in the original ballet. Akhila highlighted Sasikala's conscientious effort to incorporate non-choreographed elements into the *Swapna Vijayam* production. Akhila states:

Because ballet is such a dance form that everything is so synchronized, so choreographed.... The level of choreography there, and the level of *non-choreography* in Kuchipudi is a very deliberate step. So initially when I pictured the Kuchipudi, I was picturing something very similar, very *tic-tic-tic-tic* [demonstrating robotic, synchronized movements, chuckling]. You know? Very similar movements. So when it wasn't coming out like that, initially I was thinking "okay, we're not doing it as well as it could be done." But what I realized after talking to Aunty and seeing how she was analyzing the practices, is that level of improvisation and acting is very distinct in Kuchipudi, and she was trying to keep that deliberately.<sup>26</sup>

Akhila's comments reflect the fact that although Kuchipudi is a highly choreographed dance form, it also incorporates non-choreographed movements into all of its dance-dramas. These moments of improvisation often occur in the background of a particular scene, while the lead performers enact a choreographed piece. Notably, the deliberate inclusion of improvisational techniques remains a characteristic feature of the Kuchipudi art form, one that sets it apart from its Western dance counterpart.<sup>27</sup> Akhila's comments specifically reference the first scene of *Swapna Vijayam*,



Akhila Takkallapalli, portraying Mayura the Magician.



(L-R) Ratika Gunturi, Reneeta Basu, and Nitya Nair playing the roles of Dolls in the first scene of *Swapna Vijayam*.

during which Sasikala choreographed dance pieces for the lead characters of *Swapna* (the Kuchipudi version of the character Clara, played by Indira Sarma), and her family, while requiring the remaining dancers to improvise their movements in a manner typical of the Kuchipudi tradition. Both Reneeta's and Akhila's comments reveal the diversity of Sasikala's imaginative skill. When choreographing *Swapna Vijayam*, Sasikala included specific Kuchipudi techniques, such as the *patra praveshadaravu* (the introduction of the lead character) and non-choreographed moments of improvisation, in order to infuse a Western ballet

with a uniquely Kuchipudi flair.

In addition to expressing herself in the areas of creative dance and music choreography, Sasikala manifested her creativity in designing the costumes for the ballet. After deciding on the design patterns and color, Sasikala drew sketches by hand for a remarkable total of fifty-three costumes, and commissioned a tailor in India to stitch them in the summer of 2007. Reneeta, who aided Sasikala in the designing process, observed,

I was curious as to how the costumes would come out, whether they would be more traditional, really stick to Kuchipudi costumes, or completely innovative, brand-new costumes. And she did a little bit of both. She stuck as much as she could to the original Kuchipudi costume, but at the same time, she would just change small details here and there.

Sasikala revealed that when designing the costumes, she attempted to achieve a *fusion* of both Western and Indian aesthetic sensibilities. Therefore, the costume for the role of Swapna included both a Western skirt and an Indian *pallu*, or piece of cloth that is traditionally worn by South Asian women across the chest. Sasikala elaborated on the fusion involved in her costume design by stating,

A lot of people, when I was saying like I'm doing *Swapna Vijayam*, "Nutcracker story," they totally thought it was going to be Western. Even the orchestra people, some of them thought it was going to be Western costumes.... I told them, *my fusion* – in *my* mind, fusion is, you adapt a story into something in your own tradition, and you show that.... You don't have to change your entire costume or anything. You can adapt some of the things.



Indira Sarma, performing the role of Princess Swapna as a young girl.

Notably, Sasikala's comments concerning fusion not only highlight the creative techniques of designing the costumes and choreographing the dance pieces, but also demonstrate the broader imaginative processes of transforming a Western story into an Indian context. Reneeta described the importance of the story itself in effecting this transformation, by stating:

It wasn't until after the show that it just hit me, how genius of an idea it actually was. Because here was a story that was so simple: there's the hero, there's a bad guy, there's a fight sequence – all the basic elements of a drama are there.... It was great because it was a story that was so basic and so familiar to everyone, so people who were sitting in the audience, no matter Indian, American, whatever – they were somewhat familiar with the story.

Here, Reneeta suggests that the simplicity of *The Nutcracker* storyline allowed for a nimble shift

from Western to Indian performative worlds. However, one question that Reneeta's comments do not touch upon is the role of religion within this imaginative shift. How was the religious context of the original Western ballet, which features a scene of gift-giving around a Christmas tree, interpreted in a predominantly Hindu dance form? Interestingly, the first scene of *Swapna Vijayam* incorporates additional religious elements beyond the Western ballet, as the young Swapna not only participates in giving gifts, but also sings of the North Star and praises the birth of the baby Jesus and offers *anjali* (light offerings) to the Christmas tree. When we asked Akhila to comment on the religious nature of the first scene, she said,

It was interesting anyway when I first saw it, when I first heard the songs and how all the attention was on the North Star, and the tree.... It's amazing, just because the songs sound the same, our devotional songs, it didn't make a huge difference who we were praying to. And it generally doesn't, I think, to most Indians, because it's just such a different approach to religions.

Important to Akhila's comment is our earlier analysis of the role of Christmas in America, in which we abandoned the notion of "secular Christmas" in favor of the term "American Christmas imaginary." In light of this previous discussion, we ask: in what ways does *Swapna Vijayam* contribute to the American Christmas imaginary, and how does this compare to the Western ballet production of *The Nutcracker*? As we suggested earlier, *The Nutcracker*, although not explicitly religious, exists within a broader American Christmas system of heightened meaning, symbol, and community. While *Swapna Vijayam* undoubtedly shares in the same American Christmas imaginary, it also resides within a repertoire of Hindu religiosity.<sup>28</sup> Such a repertoire is best explained by Diana Eck, scholar of Hindu religions, who coins the term "polytheistic imagination" to encapsulate a Hindu worldview that allows for the presence of multiple sources of divinity and multiple realities.<sup>29</sup> Eck's notion of "polytheistic imagination" elucidates Akhila's comment above, that for Hindus, "it doesn't really matter who [they are] praying to." In addition, *Swapna Vijayam* encapsulates a "polytheistic imagination" not only by utilizing a traditionally Hindu dance form to depict a Western ballet, but also by introducing specific elements of Christian religious symbolism within the storyline. As the result of such a polytheistic perspective and a repertoire of Hindu religiosity, *Swapna Vijayam*, unlike its Western ballet counterpart, interprets *The Nutcracker* storyline as reflecting an *explicitly religious* imaginary of Christmas in America.

Before concluding this section, it is important to underscore the imaginative processes by which a Western ballet was transformed into an Indian classical art form. Sasikala and her team of collaborators created their own musical score, choreographed specific hand and foot gestures, and designed special costumes in order to re-imagine *The Nutcracker* within a Kuchipudi framework. Furthermore, while the basic plot of the Western ballet remained relatively untouched, specific moments, particularly in the first scene around the Christmas tree, were re-imagined as having greater religious significance than they may have carried in the original Western ballet. As a result, we can envision *Swapna Vijayam* as a process of imaginative *infusion*: the Kuchipudi bal-

let creatively incorporates two artistic worlds by infusing a Western dance form with the flavors of South Indian costume, choreography, and technique. In addition, *Swapna Vijayam* infuses the American Christmas imaginary with a polytheistic imagination that remains inherent to a Hindu religious worldview.

### ***Collaborative Imaginations: Community Engagement and Response***

Sasikala Penumarthi's years of work to bring her idea of a Kuchipudi *Nutcracker* to stage was clearly a labor of love; her enthusiasm and emotion is perceptible, as she discusses the experience of composing and staging an original choreography. But her descriptions of the process are not limited merely to the technical and creative issues of lyrics, music, dance, and pedagogy. Her experience of the creative process was synergistic not only in its stylistic and narrative qualities, but also in that its production intertwined traditional Indian arts and domains of knowledge with the realities of American suburban life and schedules. She elaborated:

I have to choreograph in mind, and then get the dancers, and then teach them, and then make them practice. See, everybody has their own activities. Everybody's busy. The King is a computer software engineer. He's busy. And whoever, the queen – whoever played the role – everybody has their own professions, and even the orchestra, they're all physicians and computer engineers, software managers.... I went through so much, it was a lot of stress! [Giggling] To think of that, oh my god! "How am I going to do that?!" But everybody respected what I was thinking, and I am so grateful to all these people.<sup>30</sup>

The production of *Swapna Vijayam* benefitted from the support and commitment of several members of the Atlanta Indian community besides the dancers themselves, who stepped outside the boundaries of their daily occupations as software engineers and workers in other fields to bring special skill sets and knowledge to the production, and to make it a priority in their daily lives. *Swapna Vijayam* offered to the community a chance to engage in a collective practice of engagement and response within a new, uncharted context. This context was unique for several reasons. Firstly, it fell outside the scope of more typical contexts of community gathering and collective engagement, such as religious rituals and functions at a temple or religious center. Secondly, each participant had to struggle, much like Sasikala, with the ways in which to infuse their practices and knowledge of Indian aesthetic traditions with the contextual shifts of the Western *Nutcracker* story, amidst the demands of a busy schedule.

Subhashini Krishnamurthy, a software engineer who recently became a first-time mother, also happens to be a classically trained Carnatic vocalist and composer, and a dear friend of Sasikala. Though on numerous occasions she has collaborated with Sasikala, she describes these prior endeavors as smaller, less complicated projects. When first presented with the opportunity to participate in *Swapna Vijayam*, she was nervous due to the immense scope of the project, which was grander than any other dance program for which she had previously composed music. She

described the trepidation she felt when Sasikala first approached her to compose the musical score for *Swapna Vijayam*.

So she had this [idea for *The Nutcracker*] – she’s the one that asked me to do music for it and I wasn’t sure initially, because this is a full-length ballet and I’ve never done anything of this scale before.... I had only heard of *The Nutcracker*, I had no idea what it was. So she actually rented the videocassette, and we both sat and watched it, and she explained the story and everything to me. Definitely, it was a challenge, because it’s not a traditional Indian thing, but music-wise, we’ve stuck to classical Carnatic style. I had only heard of *The Nutcracker* ballet till then.... I was intimidated! [Laughing] But she and I would sit together, about a month or two months we used to meet twice or thrice a week.... So we would go over maybe a page or two, maybe two or three songs a day.... Sometimes we would have feedback from others ... saying, “this is too long,” for one *raga*, so split it into different *ragas*, things like that. We’d get feedback from others. <sup>31</sup>

Subhashini’s hesitations to taking on *Swapna Vijayam* were many; though a skilled and accomplished Carnatic musician, she had never before taken on the project of composing music for a full-length ballet production. Her relative unfamiliarity with the Nutcracker story added a sense of unease, and her observation of the cultural divergences between Indian classical dance and Western ballet additionally rendered it a daunting prospect. However, she eventually acquiesced to Sasikala’s repeated pleas for help in scoring the production, and the two methodically worked through each scene of the story to create a musical score, relying on traditional Carnatic aesthetics, techniques, and collaborative insights to determine appropriate *ragas* (melodies or musical moods) for each segment of the story.

In speaking about her feelings after seeing the final product, Subhashini offered these words of appreciative interest in more cultural collaborations, seeing a way “in” to non-Indian cultures through this Kuchipudi interpretation of a Western story:

Typically, all our ballets and everything are so much involved in our religion. [Non-Indians] cannot even relate to the story as it is. So they can probably just appreciate the dance and everything, but it is all very alien to them. This is definitely a nice way to bridge the gap, for them to appreciate the dance and the story. I am sure it adds more appreciation of the dance form, too.... And I’m sure even for our Indian audience, lot of people would have just heard of *The Nutcracker* and not actually have seen it. So this was a nice way for them to start appreciating other art forms.

In other words, Subhashini’s early fears and doubts were a result of contextual unfamiliarity, but were later resolved through her reliance on traditional musical methods and techniques. As a result, she appreciated the Nutcracker story in its Indian idiom, and gained a curiosity about the ballet as it would appear in its Western format.

P.V. Rao, a professor of Physics at Emory University, offers a different perspective on the process of integrating traditional Indian aesthetics with American stage production and storytelling. A U.S. resident for over fifteen years, Dr. Rao has a great deal of knowledge of the Nutcracker story and ballet, having seen it numerous times on stage and on television. As a member of the

Atlanta Telugu community and an accomplished Telugu poet in his own right, Dr. Rao professes a deep love for the Kuchipudi dance form, and assisted in the production of *Swapna Vijayam* as a set designer. He spoke eloquently when asked about the potential difficulties he encountered in adapting the traditional Christmas images of the Nutcracker sets into Indian images and aesthetics:

Well, the story is based around Christmas! The story is a fictional story. It didn't happen in India. It didn't happen anywhere in Germany, when it was written. So it's a matter of imagination. The story, because it is already well-known, you have to start with a Christmas tree.... [when asked if he debated using an Indianized tree] No, we just bought the tree at Penny's [laughs] – or Lowe's! [More laughter] Yeah. See, once we accept it as a fiction, the importance for that part is not there. Most people who came to see the show, they already know about *Nutcracker*. So they were not being shocked. They're expecting a Christmas tree to see. If we didn't put it, it would have been a shock. So there was no problem.<sup>32</sup>

His discussion shifts somewhat when asked about the logistical details of building sets for a Kuchipudi performance, versus some of the trends and commonalities of the Western stage. He commented,

From the production point-of-view, I don't know whether you'd want to call it difficult or things like that, but there has to be something novel compared to other dance-dramas we have done.... We could have done more, but it will distract from the story.... If you see any of the modern productions, Atlanta productions, even in TV productions, there is a lot of emphasis on what we call "gimmicks." They make the Christmas tree appear on the stage, *grow* on the stage... we tried not to dominate with these technical extravagances, let's put it that way. We stayed within the Kuchipudi tradition. Actually this is a 20<sup>th</sup> century innovation. Within the Kuchipudi tradition, there is not much emphasis on the stage extravagance. They're very simple.<sup>33</sup>

Dr. Rao's description of his creative experience is, in a way, a reciprocal concept of Subhashini's experience. His views on the relationship of fiction and context undoubtedly inform his perspective, and allow him to negotiate easily between the images of the Western ballet and Indian dance-drama. While familiar with the Nutcracker story and its images before participating in *Swapna Vijayam*, his efforts to remain true to the traditions of Kuchipudi stagecraft moved him away from the Western context of performance, and more deeply into the Indian idiom.

Other commentaries worth noting in this analysis of *Swapna Vijayam* are the reflections of audience members, and the diverse imaginations that viewers brought to the production. Of the 1100 audience members attending the *Swapna Vijayam* performance that evening, approximately three-fourths were from non-Indian/Indian-American backgrounds.<sup>34</sup> Barbara Patterson, a Professor of Religion at Emory University, has a personal background in classical ballet. She possesses an intimate familiarity with the story of the Nutcracker, having performed in the production for at least eleven consecutive years during her childhood. As a member of the audience on the night of *Swapna Vijayam*, Dr. Patterson saw genius and beauty in the adaptation, declaring her appreciation for its dazzling visual appeal, as well as the virtuosity it took to produce it: "It was an *amazing*

thing. I was flabbergasted at the ingenuity. And I just can't imagine what it took to switch it." And yet, she was at once awestruck and disoriented by what she saw. She spoke honestly:

I could not imagine that form. It is such a quintessential *American* ballet phenomenon. I could not even imagine how that could become a non-Western form.... I *did* know the form of dance that she did [Kuchipudi]. And I just couldn't imagine taking this story – but it was really embodied for me. That I knew how the body looked in that dance, and it was very hard to think about translating. It was like a blank screen, you couldn't really conjure it... my imagination could not really go there.<sup>35</sup>

As an audience member with a deeply personal and *embodied* relationship with the *Nutcracker* story, Dr. Patterson found herself bewildered while watching *Swapna Vijayam*. As a classical ballet dancer, she had created meaning and relationships with the myriad elements of *The Nutcracker* as a production: the movements, the costumes, the sets and the narrative. Here, that meaning, which she has for so long held as part of her experience, was being challenged and tested in unique ways.

With some time, Dr. Patterson's interpretation of the production shifted, as she thought about the ways in which communities choose to use culture as a form of communication and social capital – symbolic structures which help communities gain or exchange power. Reflecting upon the way in which *The Nutcracker* in Western ballet has become a form of "secular Christmas," or commercial Christmas activity, in Atlanta and other metropolitan American cities, Dr. Patterson conjectured about the way in which Sasikala Penumarthi's vision of creating a Kuchipudi *Nutcracker* might have bridged more than just aesthetic gaps. She speculated about the ways in which Atlanta communities relate to dominant American and Christian traditions as a way of "claiming ground," and making space for themselves as a vital and integrated part of the local culture.

It is very curious, because it has now become – *The Nutcracker* is Christmas.... The Atlanta community has *The Nutcracker*, which is a version of secular Christmas. What in the world would an Indian population do, wanting to have anything to do with this? Every community now is getting [its token holiday] ... it's an interesting phenomenon around capital, it seems to be somehow, or status, or I don't know what. Everybody has their Christmas "thing" now. Or maybe it feels so hegemonic that other communities want something to do, because everything's closed, I don't know. [Laughter] The thing is, I think, too, ten years ago, or fifteen years ago, it wouldn't have struck me as so strange. Especially in Atlanta, where I feel this fantastic power of self-claimed identity! That's probably also what made me think, "Wow, that's really interesting. *Why*, when you all have all the ground that you could want?" But there's an interesting dynamic. When does anyone who is from the minority culture feel like they have all the ground they need and want, to be stable in an identity?<sup>36</sup>

Dr. Patterson's comments here are poignant, touching on an issue that remains at the heart of immigration and cultural studies: the question of identity. She conjectures that Sasikala Penumarthi's *Swapna Vijayam* taps not only into American mainstream contexts of classical dance, but American religious holidays and their relevance to identity.

Dr. Patterson's interpretations also factor into our earlier discussion of interpreting the *The*



*Nutcracker* within a religious framework. From her self-articulated position as a practicing Christian, Dr. Patterson observes that Christmas culture in America is replete with value and meaning for individuals -- not due to Christmas' Christian origins, but increasingly due to consumerism, social status and the struggle by various diverse communities to proclaim identity during the holiday season. No longer a "Christian" holiday for Christians alone to celebrate, Christmas is now a time of year in which every ethnic, national, religious and cultural group hold special services and gatherings that at once give members a chance to celebrate the season, while they simultaneously assert their own place, goals, ideologies, symbols, and identity in the process. The material and social power now inherent in the American Christmas imaginary give it additional weight, rendering participation in American Christmas culture desirable by other communities who offer "new" contexts of holiday seasonal celebration. In joining into American Christmas culture, in creating new avenues of celebration and sharing, and in opening their specific repertoires to the mainstream, new American communities claim some degree of "ownership" and identity in the American Christmas imaginary. Through the creation and performance of *Swapna Vijayam*, the Indian community claims a share of the power and respect among other area communities by opening its high art form of Kuchipudi to a traditional Christmas narrative, and sharing its manner of interpretation more broadly with the Atlanta public. Dr. Patterson's interpretation of *Swapna Vijayam* as an effort to gain ground in the Atlanta dance community and larger communities is valuable; she identifies *Swapna Vijayam* as the intersection of two rich networks of symbol and meaning<sup>37</sup> – the technical, expressive and narrative aspects of Indian classical dance, combined with contemporary American Christmas traditions and imaginaries – which combine to create additional social capital and status for the local Indian community.

### **Conclusion**

Considering its experimentation with Indian cultural and performative repertoires, its unique interpretation of explicit and non-explicit religious concepts related to Christmas, and its symbolic importance to both participants and audiences alike as an assimilative step into American culture, *Swapna Vijayam* created diverse experiences for its participants and observers. For the dancers who created and performed in *Swapna Vijayam*, the production was an opportunity for stylistic experimentation and imaginative infusion, as well as a chance to define and reify traditional Kuchipudi techniques. For the community members who assisted in the production, *Swapna Vijayam* served as a chance to experiment with creative technique, particularly through the use of artistic skills as a way to gain appreciation for the stories and techniques of another culture's arts and narratives. And for one audience member, *Swapna Vijayam* demonstrated a powerful way in which minority communities find voice and expression within larger, more hegemonic circles, by using traditional aesthetics in cross-cultural contexts, as a manner of gaining social capital. *Swapna Vijayam* is an important springboard for both Atlanta's Hindu community and its broader

environs, as all individuals featured in this analysis agreed that this production was merely a beginning to more complex and intricate imaginative collaborations in the future.

For the scholarly community, *Swapna Vijayam* offers data for the study of performance, culture, religion, social organization and identity formation, and also inspires new questions and lines of inquiry in the fields of dance, American religious practices, and the study of diasporic communities in America. The American Christmas imaginary constitutes an important locus of religious knowledge in mainstream American society: visibly and tangibly portrayed in traditional Christmas narratives, film, songs and symbols, Christmas in the American imagination signifies a time of heightened moral awareness, social outreach, and specialized interactions in society. By focusing on an Indian diasporic community's imagination of an American Christmas story, we are led not only to explore the ways in which new Americans locate themselves within the American Christmas imaginary, but we are also presented with an opportunity to study this system in its own right, as a special imaginative context of religion and meaning.

The study of American mainstream imaginations of Christmas, then, is nuanced and highlighted through the lens of a specific American niche community, which holds a predominant system of religion, symbol, performance and values that differs from the mainstream. In asking the questions – “Why does this community want to participate in Christmas? Why do they want to do *The Nutcracker*, when they have so many other stories to choose from? Why choose to tell *this* story at all, as a way of participating in Christmas?” – we are directed to consider why these traditions, repertoires, and narrative forms are in fact important to a broader audience in the first place. It seems justifiable to assert that these traditions and repertoires are part of a larger cultural discourse and set of phenomena that bear meaning, value and an almost magical symbolism for a broad public, well beyond the scope of any one institutional religion. It is our hope that this examination of the Kuchipudi ballet, *Swapna Vijayam*, has not only demonstrated the value of exploring new American communities, but has illuminated, perhaps more importantly, the ways in which their imaginations of American values can help us to glean a deeper knowledge about American religious values and practices as a whole.

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### Notes

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**1** *Swapna Vijayam* was held at the Ferst Center for Performing Arts at the Georgia Institute of Technology on December 15, 2007. The auditorium, which holds approximately 1,500 people, was sold out on the evening of the performance. *Swapna Vijayam* was staged as a fundraiser for the Telugu Initiative at Emory University, which is an effort to introduce Telugu Studies at Emory.

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- 2 Jennifer Fisher, "Nutcracker" *Nation: How an Old World Ballet Became a Christmas Tradition*, Yale University Press: New Haven (2003): 14.
- 3 Ibid, 42.
- 4 Ibid, 43-44.
- 5 Ibid, 50.
- 6 Arthi has trained in the South Indian dance style of Bharata Natyam for over ten years. She is now writing a dissertation that focuses on the pedagogical practices of Indian classical dance teachers in America. Harshita has been trained in both Bharata Natyam and Kuchipudi, and has studied with Sasikala Penumarthy for the last eight years. In addition to her involvement in researching this piece, she also performed in the opening scene of the *Swapna Vijayam* production.
- 7 This description is inspired by the yard display of a home in author Arthi Devarajan's neighborhood in Boston, MA. The "Jamaica Plain Christmas Castle" was featured in a Boston Globe article for its extravagant holiday display. Tania deLuzuriaga, "Remaking a Spectacle," *Boston Globe*, 07 November 2007.
- 8 Penne L. Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 155-156.
- 9 Patrick McGreevy, "Place in the American Christmas," in *Geographical Review* 80:1 (Jan 1990) 32-42, pp. 32-33.
- 10 Ibid., 165-168.
- 11 Ibid., and McGreevy, 38-40.
- 12 Catherine Albanese, "Religion and American Popular Culture: An Introductory Essay," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (1996) 733-742.
- 13 David Chidester, "The Church of Baseball, the Fetish of Coca-Cola, and the Potlatch of Rock 'n' Roll: Theoretical Models for the Study of Religion in American Popular Culture," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64:4 (Winter, 1996) 743-765.
- 14 Ibid., 745-746.
- 15 George Kliger, ed., "Indian Aesthetics and Bharata Natyam," in *Bharat Natyam in Cultural Perspective* (New Delhi, Manohar, 1993).
- 16 Ibid., see especially Chapter 1: "Bharata Natyam: History, Cultural Heritage and Current Practice."
- 17 Mohan Kakar, "Kuchipudi," *Traditions of Indian Classical Dance* (New Delhi, Clarion Books, 1979) and Suseela Misra, "Kuchipudi," in *Invitation to Indian Dances* (New Delhi, Arnold-Heinemann Publishers, 1987).
- 18 Misra, 25-30.
- 19 M. Kakar, 159.

20 For more information on Kuchipudi and other classical Indian dance forms in the United States, see Ketu H. Katrak, "Body Boundarylands: Locating South Asian Ethnicity in Performance and in Daily Life," *Amerasia Journal* 27:1 (2001): 2-33.

21 Susan L. Schwartz offers a compelling study of the solo debut of a classical Indian dancer as a cultural rite of passage. See Susan L. Schwartz, "She Stands Before Us to Bear Witness: The *Arangetram* and The *Bat Mitzvah*," in *Rasa: Performing the Divine in India* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2004).

22 Official website of the Kuchipudi Art Academy. <http://www.kuchipudi.com>.

23 Sasikala Penumarthi, oral communication, 15 April 2008.

24 Sasikala Penumarthi, oral communication, 15 April 2008.

25 Reneeta Basu, oral communication, 14 April 2006. Please note that Sasikala's students refer to her as "Aunty" as a term of respect.

26 Akhila Takkallapalli, oral communication, 14 April 2006.

27 It is important to note that the lack of improvisation in Western ballet reflects Akhila Takkallapalli's own personal observations of that dance genre. Dance scholar Curtis Carter suggests that Western ballet, in fact, allows for some elements of improvisation, particularly for highly trained dancers. However, according to our analysis, the inclusion of improvisation in Western ballet does not seem to be as systematic as Kuchipudi dance. For a more detailed discussion of improvisation in western ballet, please refer to Curtis Carter's article, "Improvisation in Dance," in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (Vol. 58, No. 2, Spring 2000, p. 181-190).

28 For a detailed discussion of repertoire, please refer to Joyce Flueckiger's *Gender and Genre in the Folklore of Middle India* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1996).

29 Diana Eck. *Darsan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. (Columbia University Press, 3rd edition, 1998), 23-24.

30 Sasikala Penumarthi, oral communication, 15 April 2008.

31 Subhashini Krishnamurthy, oral communication, 16 April 2008.

32 P.Venugopala Rao, oral communication, 16 April 2008.

33 Ibid.

34 Joyce Flueckiger, oral communication, December 2008.

35 Barbara A. B. Patterson, oral communication, 16 April 2008.

36 Ibid.