

# Spotlight on Nilimma Devi: A Touch of *India* in America

By Judith Lynne Hanna

*T*a-ka-dhi-mi . . . " chant Kuchipudi dance teachers as their students stamp out ritual rhythms while coordinating poses and *hasta mudras* (hand gestures). Nilimma Devi, an internationally acclaimed Indian dancer and choreographer living in the United States, has built on such time-honored methods of teaching Kuchipudi, and has developed her own unique way of teaching this Indian classical dance. Other forms are Bharata Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali, and Manipuri.

*Kuchipudi* is a centuries-old tradition from the village of Kuchipudi, situated on the estuary of the River Krishna, in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Upper-caste male Brahmins (originally assigned to the priesthood) founded, nurtured, and performed Kuchipudi. "It is speedier and more energetic than other forms of Indian classical dance," according to Devi, "and it has more fluid movements, theatrical expression, more obvious story-telling, controlled sense of abandon, and curvilinear shapes with the arms and legs, besides the basic triangle shapes. By contrast, *Bharata Natyam* em-

A centuries-old  
story-telling  
tradition  
finds new  
expression in a  
Washington, DC  
dance school.



**DAUGHTER AND MOTHER:** Anila Kumari and Nilimma Devi dance ode to goddess of knowledge.  
*Photograph by Craig Ashby*

phasizes consistent triangle shapes. [see "Revathi Satyu Classical Indian Dance in Texas," *DTN*, October 1988, "Spotlight on Medha Yodh, Classical Indian Dance at UCLA," *DTN*, July 1985, "Kathak Dance & 20 Years on the Gold Coast," [Chitresh Das], *DTN*, September 1990].

Consistent with this multicultural era, Devi's students include first-generation Indian immigrants cementing ties to their Indian heritage, second-generation American-born Indians learning Indian values embedded in, and imparted through, Kuchipudi, and non-Indians expanding their growth as dancers.

Devi is founder and director of the Sutradhar Institute of Dance and Related Arts, located in Kensington, Maryland, near Washington, DC. *Sutradhar* means thread-



## A TOUCH OF INDIA

bearer, an important character in traditional Kuchipudi dance-drama who creates a link between the performer, the performance, and the audience. This word has been in Devi's head for about 20 years, and the pundits said it was an auspicious name for her school. It is one of about 40 Indian dance schools in the greater Washington, DC area. Devi's Kuchipudi students here are mostly female beginners from five to twelve years old. Continuing and advanced students from 15 to 30 years old also take class.

Devi also teaches Kuchipudi at local universities (George Mason, George Washington, Johns Hopkins University Peabody Institute, and University of Maryland at College Park), and has been an artist-in-residence for state universities in Wisconsin, Maryland, and Minnesota. Her students here are mostly undergraduate female beginners in Kuchipudi. Devi gives workshops in public schools, frequently performs, and curates Indian and pan-Asian dance concerts. In addition, she has conducted research in India on creativity (improvisation, changes in execution, and cross-fertilization of styles) in the tradition of *hasta mudras* in all forms of classical Indian dance, seeking out the views of master teachers such as Dr. Nataraja Ramakrishna and Kalamidhi Narayanan.

**WAITING IN THE WINGS:** Three dancers await Kuchipudi performances circa December 1993. Photograph courtesy of Nilimma Devi



### Becoming a Kuchipudi Teacher

How did Nilimma Devi learn Kuchipudi? She explains, "It was my aunt. My parents were from the small town of Peshawar, in the north of India where dance was not performed or even heard of. We moved to Delhi, the capital of India, where my aunt lived. She went to a finishing college (Lady Irwin) where she learned interpretations of Indian dance from Uday Shankar's troupe members. So she taught me and my younger sister dance movements to popular Indian songs from Bombay films of the 1940s.

"When my family moved to Kabul, Af-

ghanistan, we'd dance for the Indian Embassy for amusement. Dancing at age nine was okay. But at 13, when I wanted to pursue it seriously, my family objected.

"My grandfather and younger uncles would leave the room when I danced. Men wouldn't consider you respectable if you were doing something with your body. Dance had been an activity for prostitutes. My father was a Hindu from a Muslim majority area, a cultured man, in India's diplomatic corps. He let us dance, but said we can't make it a career. He didn't want anyone to look at me as inferior. What I learned, I wouldn't tell my male relatives. It was a battle. But for me, I kept dancing, practicing in the bathroom."

When Devi's family moved to Andhra Pradesh, in south-central India, she encountered an Indian classical dance renaissance, which had grown out of India's nationalist movement. The ethereal beauty of Anna Pavlova's 1929 ballet performance in India may have, in part, rekindled enthusiasm for Hindu dance. For centuries, what became known as classical Indian dance had been the province of specially trained high-status temple dancers, *devadasis*, found in many pockets of the country. However, beginning in the 12th century, with Muslim invasions, political upheavals, and colonialism bringing Christian missionaries, these dancers became associated with prostitution, and women's dance fell into disrepute. Then, in the 1930s, urban intellectual leaders of India's nationalist movement designated classical dance as a symbol of national identity and a respectable activity.

Devi recalls that "Kuchipudi dance-drama style was taken from Kuchipudi Village and transformed as a solo classical



**CELEBRATION:** Alka Ahuja, Anila Kumari, and Aradhana Venkatesan of Nilimma Devi Dance Theatre rehearse a dance to Saraswati, the goddess of learning, for the 150th birthday of the Smithsonian Institution. Photograph by Joe Broome



dance for female urban dancers and urban audiences. Besides my family opposition, another barrier to my learning Kuchipudi was that I didn't speak the local language of Telugu. Each classical dance style uses the regional language particular to its origins and also ancient Sanskrit. I coped because Kuchipudi shares with other regions Indian poetry, metaphors, and emotions about how a romantic woman should be seen in relation to nature, for example, eyes like a doe, mouth like a lotus, and walk like an elephant."

Her guru, Dr. Nataraj Ramakrishna, had a troupe, so between the ages of 19 and 21, Devi performed in three dance-dramas. She quit performing when she was 24, after meeting her husband, an American. They moved to Madison, Wisconsin, where she taught at the University of Wisconsin, in A.C. Scott's Asian Theatre Department for a semester in 1969, and then in the extension program for four years.

### A Unique Approach to Teaching Indian Dance

Devi is in the first generation of female Kuchipudi teachers in India and the United States.

- Devi teaches Kuchipudi as a multidisciplinary, kinetic art linked with music, fine arts, yoga, religion, philosophy, poetry, and natural history.
- "Nowadays, people don't teach the traditional yoga-based stretch exercises that I learned when I was studying Kuchipudi in India," recounts Devi. "They want to shortcut teaching. But I give 20 minutes of exercises to warm up the joints and make the body limber for the extreme knee bends."
- Many of her classes at the Sutradhar Institute are an integrated age group: "Everyone from 3½ to 24 years old. Sophisticated

dancers work at a higher level. Yet there are movements you routinely do at any level.

- "Each student teaches another for about ten minutes out of a one and one-half hour class," Devi reports. "Reversing the student-teacher roles motivates students to learn well." She adapted this approach from the Montessori and Froebel methods that her aunt, who directed a primary school, shared with her.
- "Devi encourages students to be creative and allows them to choreograph their own ideas," says Usha Charya, the mother of one of Devi's students. "She never gets impatient with the children, unlike some of the traditional teachers who are really harsh."

"I do not like the overpowering, high-

profile guru in the Indian context," reiterates Devi. "The guru is the absolute divine in your life and in your learning. I don't like to be that way. I think that as a good teacher, the only thing I can do is to inspire the students. I'm a token fuel in their lives. I'm not the ultimate knowledge myself. I want to pass on an attitude. Once they have the attitude, they can learn much more than I know. If I can fulfill that role, I feel I am a good teacher."

- Giving the theoretical basis of Kuchipudi at the outset of instruction is important to Devi. "When I studied Kuchipudi in India, we were not given any theoretical basis of Kuchipudi to a beginning student even after six years of instruction. The arts were secrets, guarded family treasures. There was no tape-recording for the guru's fear of being robbed of these secrets. Besides, the gurus thought if theory was taught first, the student would think she or he knew the dance; the practical is vast. I believe that by knowing the theory you add depth to your dancing, but only by doing the dance can you learn it. Knowing the theory also shortens the learning distance. Some gurus are so rigid about the time factor. There was one fellow who went for six months to learn, and all the guru asked him to do was go for vegetables. You have to hang around. They try you out, see if you are a true disciple."
- Each summer Devi teaches a four-week

**COSMIC DANCER:** Nilimma Devi invoking the god Shiva, the cosmic dancer. The pose is common to other forms of Indian classical dance; the movement distinguishes the style.

Photograph by Arinash Pashricha



**MAKING A CONNECTION:** Dance students learn how different arts connect as they collaboratively paint a mask. Photograph courtesy of Nilimma Devi



# Hasta Mudras



**Pataka:** flag. Used in beginning a dance, depicting clouds, rain, forest, forbidding things, denoting "one," bosom, night, river, heaven, horse, reclining, entering a street, equality, applying sandal wood paste, bathing, palmyra leaf, sprinkling water, wall, cutting, slap, to bless, plate, mirror, give protection, caress, white, exclaim, Brahmin, "come here."



**Tripataka:** three parts of the flag. Used to depict a crown, tree, vajra weapon, demi-god Indira, flickering flames, arrow, placing of "tilakam" (dot, bindi) on forehead, arrows hook, tying a turban, cleaning nose or ear, red, stage whispers.



**Ardhapataka:** half flag. Used to depict tender shoots, panel for writing, bank of river, dagger, knife, horn, "both," tower.



**Kartarimukha:** arrow shaft face. Used to depict separation of a man and woman, opposition, stealing, corner of the eye, disagreement, lightening, a creeper, falling, red paint for feet ("alta"), scissors.  
—Single Hand Gestures, source *Sutradhar Kuchipudi Dance Institute*

In Sanskrit, *hasta* (hand, forearm) and *mudra* (seal) refer to hand gestures dating back to sacred performances during the time of the *Vedas*, around 1500 B.C.

Beginning in the classical period of Indian art, *mudras* were introduced to dance as an intrinsic part of communication and described and codified in treatises on the basis of which various genres of Indian dance were founded—Bharata Natyam, Kathakali, Kuchipudi, Odissi, and other forms found in nearly all parts of the Indian subcontinent. In one category of Indian dance-theater, interpretative dance (*nritya*), the *mudras* have real language value, literal word meanings. In pure dance (*nritya*), the *mudras* have a decorative value and are used as 'pure sound.' Meanings may be different for *mudras* with one hand or two hands.

In 1995, Nilimma Devi spent eight months in India on a grant from the Asian Institute of Indian Studies researching the tradition and role of creativity in *hasta mudras*. She discovered many new *hastas* that have entered the dance idiom but that creative work is not highlighted. "Tradition is revered to such an extent that we are not made aware of the creative process," she told the *Bombay Times*. As a trans-national dancer who choreographs contemporary themes, Devi makes sure that she does not go beyond the bounds of tradition since the hand gestures have an inherent ability to transcend the spoken language barrier and carry cultural references. In teaching she uses universal themes and stories.

Anila Kumari has interpreted the following *Shlokas* (Sanskrit verses) taken from Nandikesvara's *Abhinaya Darpanam*, the most significant treatise on dance gestures, written in 1000 A.D.

*Bow down to Siva, Cosmic Dancer  
Whose limbs are the entire Universe  
Whose lips speak the language of the universe  
Whose ornaments are the moon and stars.*

*Where the hand moves, the eyes must follow  
Where the eyes gaze, the mind will follow  
Where the heart goes, the sublime taste of "rasa" is savored.*

...  
*O Goddess of the Stage, Victory to Thee  
Thou art the patron of actors and dancers  
Bless my limbs with your art to enable me to charm the world.*

## A TOUCH OF INDIA

multidisciplinary summer program based on the 2000-year-old theme of the Indian epic of the *Ramayana*. This epic continues to inspire dance, theater, and music in much of Asia. Devi treats the Hindu *Ramayana* epic not as a religious work, but as great human experience. She teaches the characters as presenting the ideals of a particular historical period.

Young people ages six to twelve engage in dance, yoga, mask making, learning Sanskrit, pottery, *Rangoli* (floor painting), and creative writing. "I cultivate the spirit of an informed and open mind," says Devi.

Students learn how the written word can transform into performance, and what goes into the process. "The poetry is given life when we start performing. Children write and then perform their own poems."

Also, "students engage in crafts to see how different elements are pulled into the great *Ramayana* epic."

The program also focuses on the comparative value of written and spoken traditions. "In Indian thought, oral expression is more important and sacred than written texts, which limit the meaning of words," explains Devi. Hearing the recitation of mnemonics in Kuchipudi is essential to learning the dance. Perpetuated through the oral tradition, the performing arts are an arena of rich creativity. "The *Ramayana*, for example, exists in many versions. Even each village has its own twist. I tell my oral version taken from Valmiki, the first poet."

- An active performer, Devi is a role model for her students. Advanced students sometimes participate in performances, especially her daughter, Anila Kumari, her most devoted disciple. Described by the *Washington Post* as having a "quicksilver quality," Anila Kumari followed the ancient Indian tradition of a daughter following in her mother's footsteps; families passed on traditions.

Devi laughs: "Anila was difficult. She wouldn't go to learn from anybody else but Mama." Kumari has been teaching Kuchipudi with her mother at the Institute and is also choreographing and performing.

## Kuchipudi in India and America

In India, formerly-stigmatized classical Indian dance performed by women has enjoyed a renaissance. Different forms are now danced by women of the elite and new urban middle classes, and they are taught



## A TOUCH OF INDIA

by women and men. "Now you don't have to be born into the language of the region of a specific classical dance form. Girls now come from everywhere to learn a regional style. A girl's dance debut is like the equivalent of an American 'sweet sixteen party,' a rite of passage. It marks passage from one's childhood to adulthood," says Devi.

Moreover, in India, skill in classical Indian dance has become a much-prized attribute for a woman of the privileged classes seeking a husband. Girls in India study classical Indian dance much like girls in the West study ballet. In diluted form, Kuchipudi has been embraced by the high school, the cinema, on the stage, and at private gatherings.

Turning to Indian dance for Indians in

North America, Devi says, "The meaning of the dance is the same as in India—and more. Parents in the United States see the dance as an auspicious symbol for toughness, survival, good luck, and creation. It is a link to their roots. All too often, however, exposure to Indian dance comes from the Indian films that show a kind of popularized and westernized dance with Indian characteristics. Tradition is sometimes watered down by dance teachers not well trained, and standards not as high as in India."

Kuchipudi, like other classical dance forms, is a link between Indians past and present. Many Indian immigrants to the United States or Canada find a different lifestyle and set of values from what they had in India. Many families dislike the Western permissiveness for females, par-

ticularly at the high school level. Indian parents hope their children can partake of the Indian values conveyed through Kuchipudi. A traditional message portrays the role of the ideal, beautiful, modest Indian woman.

Indians who have become more Westernized, often the second generation, wish to preserve their cultural identities. Kuchipudi is symbolic of Indian identity—it's traditional culture in a changing context.

"Even though my daughter, Neeli, is growing up in American culture," explains Charya, "she gets through Kuchipudi an appreciation for Indian customs, rituals, grace, music, skill, and mythology of India. True, she's American, and she's usually with other Americans. But at Ms. Devi's dance school, she can find a sense of identity and belonging. She won't feel she's totally different. She's a kid of the third culture—neither Indian nor American."

For Neeli, as for many Indian immigrants, Indian dance performances evoke feelings of community as dancers and spectators come together.

And what does the study of Kuchipudi offer non-Indian dancers?

Devi thinks Kuchipudi offers every dancer an expanded body awareness, increased movement potential, heightened mind-body integration, and a feel for the relationship between dance and philosophy. Dancers also develop a sense of rhythm within a steady pulse. They learn the necessity of relaxed feet for producing slapping sounds when stamping, which helps relax calf muscles and the Achilles tendon, thereby developing a weightier sense of balance. Kuchipudi teaches a more even use of arms to legs than does ballet or modern dance. Dancers acquire the ability to use the face expressively, focus the eyes, and use the fingers flexibly in symbolic movement to communicate poetry.

Using both traditional and western teaching approaches, Nilimma Devi exemplifies a beautiful and strong bridge between India and America: "As an immigrant I bring my own art, but I am here and my art changes a bit. I have to be true to my art but also true to my new audiences and environment." ★

Judith Lynne Hanna is a well-known scholar who is currently an expert witness on First Amendment rights in dance cases. She is author of *To Dance is Human*, *The Performer-Audience Connection*, *Disruptive School Behavior*, and *Dance and Stress*.

# BRING YOUR DANCE TROUPE TO ORLANDO!

## Perform

at Walt Disney World Resort®  
or Universal Studios Florida®!

## Participate

in a Disney Dancin' workshop!

Visit Walt Disney World Resort®, Universal Studios Florida®,  
Sea World, Wet 'N Wild, Cocoa Beach and much more!

We provide round trip air or  
bus transportation, accom-  
modations at **Walt Disney's  
All-Star**, meals, attraction  
admission, tour guide support  
and more.

**LOWEST FARES  
GUARANTEED!**

**FLY WITH US AND**

**SAVE!**

BANDFEST@DIGITAL.NET  
**American Tours  
& Travel, Inc.**

**1/800/692-7272**