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Move Like the Kuchipudi Man

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Documenting Kuchipudi and art forms in general is necessary. After performing the dance form for 15 years, gender bender Haleem Khan is working on a documentary on its tradition.

Costumes reveal the many layers of a dancer's soul. Sometimes, they even hide gender stereotypes associated with performing arts. When Haleem Khan, 31, a Hyderabad-based Kuchipudi dancer walks across the stage in a flowing traditional woman's attire and make up, performing a

woman's role, it's hard to believe that there is a man playing the beautiful nayika. Such is the feminine power in Halim's performance as a woman that you wonder why he craves to wear the male costume in his choreographies. The dancer has fought many odds to pursue the classical dance form for 15 years. He is now working on a documentary on Kuchipudi to bridge the gap between the dance form and the youth.

Khan feels that there is disconnect between the classical arts and people. He says, "I want to bring people closer to the dance form through my performance and the documentary. The youth should be made more culturally aware. Documenting Kuchipudi and art forms in general is necessary. I would be profiling artistes who are preserving the legacy of dance." Khan was inspired to start learning Kuchipudi after watching K Vishwanath's movies. "I feel K Viswanath's movies inspired a lot of people of my generation. Sadly, there are not many people interested in making movies on cultural aspects. Perhaps, I was lucky to watch those movies. I started learning Kuchipudi when I was studying in standard 12. No one at home had a clue that I was learning dance. I underwent enormous stress. I attended lessons everyday. It was pretty tough to hide the fact from my parents. I didn't want them to find out owing to the stigma connected to a boy learning dance. But this changed. I am pursuing dance as an active career," explains Khan, who has staged more than 800 solo and group performances in India and abroad.

He would cut the time from his tuitions to secretly attend dance tuitions and practise. He found his love in the woman-oriented domain, with a fairly strong tradition of male dancers after convincing a lot of people through his determination. Donning a woman's costume for many roles in performance and then taking a male lead in the male costume was even harder. Haleem found his way. He says, "Any dance form is bound to change with the times. While women have been performing certain dance forms since the earliest times, it's a good sign that more and more men are entering the arena of Kuchipudi."

According to Haleem, performing a woman's role in Kuchipudi is a sublime test of one's caliber and the command on the dance techniques. "Not all male dancers can carry female impersonation. I am blessed with a perfect body to perform any role. But not many people know that it was very common for men to play female characters in Kuchipudi," adds Haleem who learnt Kuchipudi from KV Subramaniam, a student of the well-known guru, Vempati Chinna Satyam. He is now trying to change the idiom of Kuchipudi to reach the young audience. He has used ghazal and English poetry for choreography. "Many people think that classical dance is boring. I am trying to change that view," he says. Haleem recently performed Dance & Dialogue. "It gave the audience a chance to talk and interact with the dancer."

Haleem has conducted workshops on the fusion of Kuchipudi with Flamenco. He has choreographed and performed a fusion of Kuchipudi and Thai traditional dance Khon and Lakon Nai with a team of Thai dancers.



Steps towards change

- **Yaad-e-maazee:** Haleem's work was about going back to an era of leisure, love and romance. It staged dances choreographed to the poetry of Abul Hasan Tana Shah, Mohd Quli Qutb Shah and others. Ghazals and Urdu poetry were merged with contemporary dance.
- **Rhyme & Rhythm:** It was a blend of English poetry and Indian dance. Works of poets like Keats, Rossetti, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarojini Naidu were interpreted through classical and modern dance.
- **Mélange of Dances** merged Western Classical Dance with Kuchipudi. It was supported by the Alliance Française of Hyderabad and the French Embassy in India.



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