



STUDIO
PADMINI

Master Garu



AN ARCHANA PADMINI FILM

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MASTER GARU
A Feature Length Documentary
Language: Telugu, Malayalam, English
India

Dossier



Kuchipudi Yakshaganam is a classical narrative theatre tradition rooted in Kuchipudi, originating from Andhra Pradesh. It is a vibrant blend of dance, music, spoken dialogue, and expressive acting. Unlike solo performances, Kuchipudi Yakshaganam is a full-length theatrical presentation featuring multiple characters, elaborate costumes, and intricate rhythms, often performed through the night. It embodies a holistic storytelling tradition where movement, voice, and emotion come together to bring mythological narratives to life.

LOGLINE

An observational documentary following the life and art of Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma, the last living master of Kuchipudi Yakshaganam, as he strives to preserve and transform a fading tradition.





SYNOPSIS

This documentary is a quiet, immersive portrait of Pasumarthi Rattaiiah Sarma, a unique artist who has chosen devotion over recognition, preservation over popularity, and truth over convenience. Through an extended period of close observation, the film traces the life, practice, and philosophy of the master, and through him, about Kuchipudi Yakshaganam, a traditional dance-theatre form rich with music, dialogue, and storytelling.

At a time when Kuchipudi has largely shifted toward shorter, stylised stage presentations, he remains among the last torchbearers of its original narrative form. His practice is not merely artistic—it is an act of resistance. Resistance against dilution, against commercialisation, and against the quiet erasure of cultural memory.

The film travels with him, unfolds through everyday moments: teaching sessions, rehearsals, conversations, silences, and the rhythms of a life shaped entirely by art. As the camera walks beside him, it reveals not just the discipline of his craft but the philosophy that underpins it—a belief in art as a form of service, not transaction.

Beyond the stage, his influence extends across generations of students from diverse backgrounds. Defying social barriers and financial limitations, he opened his doors to all who wished to learn, nurturing a community far beyond his cultural roots. This spirit of inclusivity has allowed the tradition to travel, finding new life in Irinjalakkuda, Kerala, through his disciple Sreelakshmi Govardhanan—nearly 1000 kilometers from its origin in Andhra Pradesh. Yet, this journey has not been without struggle. The film gently captures the emotional and material challenges he has endured—resistance from within his own community, financial instability, and personal hardships that might have deterred a lesser spirit. Still, he persists, anchored by an unwavering commitment to authenticity.

This is not a film that seeks to glorify, but to witness. It is an honest, unembellished impression of a man and his world—where art is lived, not performed; where legacy is not claimed, but quietly carried forward.

In documenting his journey, the film becomes an act of preservation in itself—holding space for a vanishing tradition, and for the values that sustain it.

Basic Narrative Roadmap

The film begins at Thrissur Railway Station in Kerala, as Sreelakshmy, the disciple, prepares to embark on a journey to Andhra Pradesh. The train journey becomes an emotional and psychological passage—marked by anticipation and quiet anxiety, as she is acutely aware of her guru's deteriorating health—while travelling to meet her mentor, Sri Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma.

Arriving at Vijayawada, she continues by road to the historic Kuchipudi village—an ancient cultural enclave in Andhra Pradesh, known as the birthplace of the Kuchipudi dance tradition and home to generations of Masters who have preserved this art form through lived practice. It is here that she reunites with the master in his home—an intimate, lived-in space that embodies the tradition he has safeguarded for decades.

What follows is an extended period of observation and immersion. Structured across a series of days spread over a few months, the film unfolds through lived moments with the master. Each day—or cluster of days—reveals different facets of his life, philosophy, pedagogy, and the layered world of Kuchipudi Yakshaganam.

Through conversations, rehearsals, silences, and everyday routines, the film gradually explores both the artist and the art form in depth.

The narrative then shifts as the master travels to Irinjalakkuda, Kerala—the home of his most devoted disciple—where preparations begin for a significant performance at the Koodalmanikyam Temple. These preparatory days capture the rigour of training, the transmission of knowledge, and the evolving dynamic between guru and disciple.

As rehearsals intensify, the film interweaves moments that reveal the master's advancing age and physical fragility, including visits for medical consultations—quietly underscoring the urgency of preservation and continuity.

The film culminates in the performance at Koodalmanikyam Temple, a sacred and culturally significant space in Kerala, known for its deep-rooted ritual traditions and artistic heritage. Staged in the presence of the master—who also performs—the event becomes a moment of profound artistic culmination and emotional resonance, where tradition is not only honoured but actively passed forward.

In the closing movement, the master returns to his village. Sreelakshmy accompanies him on the train, and their shared journey takes on a deeper meaning—suggesting not an ending, but a continuum. Their bond, like the art they carry, extends beyond geography and time—an ongoing journey of transmission, memory, and legacy.



Meet the Subjects





Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma

Born in 1944 in Andhra Pradesh's Krishna district, Sri Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma is one of the last living custodians of traditional Kuchipudi Yakshaganam—a classical dance-theatre form that seamlessly integrates music, dialogue, rhythm, and storytelling. Trained in the Gurukula system among the hereditary Bhagavathulu community, he represents a generation for whom art and life are inseparable.

A highly accomplished performer in his early years, Sarma was renowned for his powerful portrayals in Yakshaganam, particularly in *Stree Vesham* and mythological roles such as Satyabhama, Narada, and Krishna. Over time, he evolved into a revered guru, dedicating his life to preserving and transmitting the original narrative-theatre format of Kuchipudi at a time when it was increasingly replaced by shorter, modern stage adaptations.

For over seven decades, he has mentored students across caste, gender, and regional boundaries, embodying a deeply inclusive philosophy. His teaching extends beyond technique to character, voice, music, and stagecraft—preserving the holistic essence of Yakshaganam. Notably, his five-year mentorship of a group of students from Kerala led to the landmark staging of *Usha Parinayam* in its authentic Telugu format, reviving an all-night performance tradition in a new cultural context.

Despite receiving prestigious honours, including the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (2009), Sarma has led a life of quiet austerity, detached from fame and financial gain. He often teaches with little or no compensation, viewing art as a form of cultural service rather than profession.

His journey has not been without hardship. He faced resistance within his own community for upholding traditional practices, endured personal struggles, and navigated financial limitations—all while remaining steadfast in his mission.

Today, as a teacher, performer, and cultural reformer, Sri Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma stands as a living bridge between past and future—his life's work ensuring that an endangered artistic tradition continues to breathe across generations and geographies.

Sreelakshmi Govardhanan, the disciple

Based in Irinjalakkuda, Kerala, Sreelakshmy Govardhanan is a Kuchipudi dancer, choreographer, and researcher who serves as a vital bridge between tradition and contemporary practice. Known for her expressive abhinaya and refined technique, she combines performance with deep scholarly engagement.

Nearly two decades ago, she undertook a defining journey—travelling over a thousand kilometres from Kerala to Kuchipudi village in Andhra Pradesh to train under the legendary Sri Pasumarthi Rattaiah Sarma. At a time when few outside the traditional community pursued this path, she immersed herself in the rigorous Gurukula system, mastering the rare and demanding tradition of Kuchipudi Yakshaganam. Today, she stands as his foremost disciple and a key inheritor of this lineage—seen by her guru as a vital hope for its continuation. With a Master’s degree in Psychological Counselling from Montfort College, Bengaluru, she is the founder and artistic director of Avantika Space for Dance, a Kerala-based centre for learning, performance, and research, which she has led for over a decade.



Her work includes extensive research and documentation of Kuchipudi Yakshaganam, along with explorations of interconnections between India’s theatrical traditions. Through performances, workshops, and lecture demonstrations, she actively nurtures a new generation of practitioners.

A recipient of major honours—including the Ustad Bismillah Khan Yuva Puraskar (Sangeet Natak Akademi), Kalashree (Kerala Sangeetha Nataka Akademi), and Aditya Vikram Birla Kalakiran Puraskar—she is also a graded Doordarshan artiste, an empanelled ICCR artiste, and a Junior Research Fellow of the Ministry of Culture. Rooted in tradition yet forward-looking, Sreelakshmy’s journey is one of devotion, risk, and resilience—positioning her as both a disciple and a torchbearer of a fragile artistic legacy.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

This film began not with an idea, but with a presence. When I first encountered Shri Pasumarti Rattaiah Sharma as a student, I was struck not by performance, but by stillness—by a life lived in quiet, unwavering commitment to something larger than oneself. In a world that constantly demands visibility, speed, and reinvention, here was a man who had chosen to remain rooted. Not out of resistance for its own sake, but out of deep faith in the integrity of a tradition. This documentary is not an attempt to explain him. It is an attempt to be with him.

I am drawn to the spaces between moments—the pauses in conversation, the repetitions in practice, the silences that carry as much weight as performance. Through an observational approach, I hope to capture not just what he does, but how he exists within his art. The camera does not seek to interrogate, but to witness. Master garu's life raises questions that feel urgent today: What does it mean to preserve something in its truest form? What is the cost of refusing to adapt for visibility?

His journey is also deeply human. Beneath the discipline and devotion lies vulnerability—struggles with recognition, financial instability, and personal hardship. These are not separate from his art; they are woven into it.

As I walk alongside him over these months, the film reveals itself slowly, organically—much like the Yakshaganam tradition he upholds. Expansive, unhurried, and immersive.

This is not a story of success or failure. It is a meditation on dedication, on legacy, and on the quiet power of choosing purpose over prominence.

In making this film, I am not just documenting a master. I am learning how to look, how to listen, and how to stay. This documentary is an attempt to witness, not interpret.

His life raises questions that feel urgent today:
What does it mean to preserve something truthfully?
What is lost when art becomes transactional?

By walking alongside him over months, the film becomes a shared journey—one that slowly reveals the intersections of art, struggle, and purpose.

This is a film about staying—with a person, with a tradition, with time itself.



TREATMENT

The film adopts an observational, organic cinema approach, privileging duration, texture, and presence over exposition. The camera remains patient and unobtrusive—always intimate but respectful. Frames linger longer than expected, allowing the viewer to enter the rhythm of Sarma garu's world.

The visual language resists dramatisation. It seeks instead to create a space where the audience can experience time, discipline, and devotion as they are lived. The film will take a slice-of-life approach, observing his life and the art he breathes through immersive time spent alongside the master in Kuchipudi, Andhra, and Kerala.

POSITIONING STATEMENT

An observational documentary rooted in cultural preservation and lived philosophy, the film speaks to global conversations around intangible heritage, artistic integrity, and the tension between tradition and modernity.

WHY THIS FILM NOW

Traditional art forms like Kuchipudi Yakshaganam are at risk of disappearing—not abruptly, but gradually, through adaptation and loss of depth.

As fewer practitioners remain committed to its original form, documenting a living master becomes urgent.

This film is not only about one individual—it is about preserving a way of thinking, practicing, and living that is slowly fading.



Project Status

Stage

Research and Development completed. Currently in pre-production, with principal photography scheduled to begin at the end of April 2026.

Shooting Locations

Andhra Pradesh and Kerala.

Timeline

60 days of shooting spread over 6 months, with the project aiming to complete post-production and obtain censor certification by December 2026.

Outreach & Distribution Plan

The project aims for a wide film festival presence, targeting major festivals both in India and internationally.

Following its festival run, the documentary is intended to be released on an appropriate OTT platform, enabling wider accessibility and extended audience engagement.



Behind the Lens



Director Archana Padmini

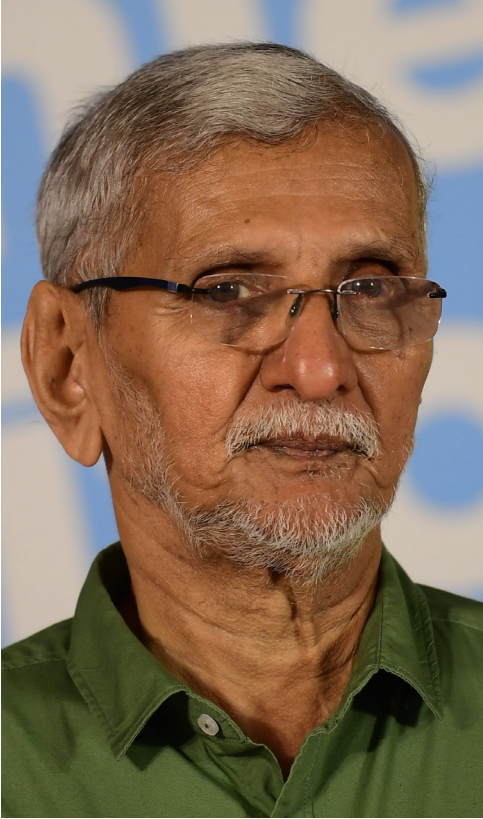
Archana Padmini is a film curator, actor, and filmmaker engaged with contemporary cinema across curation, direction, and performance. Her work reflects a strong commitment to alternative cinematic practices, gender discourse, and collective storytelling.

She has curated significant film programme, including 9 Pencinemakal —a landmark package of Malayalam short films by women that travelled to international platforms such as the UK Asian Film Festival, London, and venues across India. She has also curated for the Women's International Film Festival Kerala (2020) and curated Kummatty (1979) for United Screen, Berlin.

Archana has served on juries for major festivals including IDSFFK (2018) and has been closely associated with platforms like Signs Festival and Montage Film Society.

Her filmmaking experience includes direction and production assistance on projects with noted filmmakers such as Anjali Menon, M. Manikandan, Don Palathara, Sanju Surendran, and others.

As an actor, she has appeared in acclaimed films including Nayattu, Bheeshma Parvam, Sulaikha Manzil, Wonder Women, and Ilaveezha Poonchira, alongside recent projects such as Parasakthi (dir. Sudha Kongara), Balan (dir. Chidambaram), and Selvi (dir. Sailesh Rathnakumar). Her performance work extends to independent cinema, documentaries, and theatre, including Khasakhinte Ithihasam directed by Deepan Sivaraman.



Creative Producer **N.S. Madhavan**

N. S. Madhavan is a prominent Malayalam writer known for his distinctive voice in contemporary Indian literature. Widely acclaimed for his novel *Lanthan Batheriyile Luthiniyakal* (Litanies of the Dutch Battery) and short stories such as *Higuita*, *Thiruthu*, *Chulaimedile Shavangal*, and *Vanmarangal Veezhumpol*, his work blends sharp social insight with imaginative storytelling. In addition to fiction, he writes football columns and travel essays, and is a distinguished fellow of the Kerala Sahitya Akademi. His contributions have earned him several major honours, including the Odakkuzhal Award, Kerala Sahitya Akademi Awards for both story and novel, the Muttathu Varkey Award, Mathrubhumi Literary Award, and the Crossword Book Award. In 2024, he was awarded the Ezhuthachan Puraskaram, the highest literary honour conferred by the Government of Kerala.



Executive Producer **Dr. Asha Achy Joseph**

Dr. Asha Achy Joseph is a filmmaker, producer, and mentor with over three decades of experience across documentary, fiction, and television. A faculty member at the School of Communication, Sacred Heart College, Kochi, she brings a strong research and media education foundation to her practice. Her debut documentary *Anyar* (The Outsiders)—on Christian women's inheritance rights featuring Mary Roy—was selected to Indian Panorama at IFFI 1998. She has produced 2000+ television programs across major satellite channels in Kerala, including the award-winning children's programme *Changatikkootam* (1999), and co-produced the National Award-winning short fiction *The Diary of a Housewife* (2001), directed by Vinod Sukumaran. A Chevening Scholar in Broadcast Journalism, she trained in children's programming in Wales and has collaborated with Lal Jose and Mohan Raghavan. Her short fiction *Ore Udal* (One Body) was selected to Indian Panorama at IFFI 2015 and screened internationally. A founding member of the Women in Cinema Collective, she remains active in collaborative filmmaking, and in 2025 completed her debut feature *PALAMA: Do You See Me?* with the NaSym Collective, presented by Jeo Baby and produced by Mankind Cinemas and Symmetry Cinemas.



Executive Producer **Rajesh T. Divakaran**

A graduate of Westminster Film School, Rajesh T. Divakaran is a writer–filmmaker with over two decades of experience across film, OTT, broadcast, and advertising in India and internationally.

Since 2017, he has collaborated with Anjali Menon, serving as Assistant Director and later Associate Director on projects including Koode (starring Prithviraj Sukumaran), Netflix India’s Indian Predator, and Wonder Women, produced by RSVP Movies and Little Films India. His short film LOST was selected among the Top 200 films in a Netflix India–Film Companion competition and premiered internationally at the SF3 Film Festival (2023), where it was one of 16 films selected worldwide. His graduation film Silent Dark Eyes was selected for the Cannes Short Film Corner (2012).



Supervising Producer **Rajesh Gopal Sobhana**

With over two decades of experience in media production and creative project management, Rajesh has worked across acclaimed OTT, television, and feature film projects. He recently served as Executive Producer for ZEE5 (Malayalam), and earlier as Supervising Producer with SonyLIV, contributing to the Malayalam Originals slate across multiple shows and developing stories from script to screen. He also worked as Script Supervisor with Anjali Menon on the feature film Wonder Women. His experience spans leading television networks including NDTV, UTV, TV9, Asianet, Mathrubhumi, and MediaOne TV.

Cinematographer **Medha Sagari**

Medha Sagari, currently based in Kerala, studied English Language and Literature from MG University before obtaining a Master's in Cinematography from Bournemouth University. Her interests include themes of gender and caste, as well as folk and performance art. After completing a foundation course in Acting and Theatre-Making at Drama School Mumbai, she was awarded a fellowship from Thespo, a youth theatre movement, where she collaborated with other fellows to organize a nationwide theatre festival. In the UK, Medha has been involved in several student productions and music videos where she headed the Camera department. Her short poetic documentary, "Fitrat," which explores student immigration in the UK, was screened at the Rising Voices – BIPoC Writing Showcase. Medha is dedicated to exploring more aspects of visual storytelling through her work.



Sound Designer **Jayadevan Chakkadath**

Jayadevan Chakkadath is an Indian sound editor and recordist known for his significant contributions to Malayalam cinema. He received the National Film Award for Best Audiography in 2017, along with four Kerala State Film Awards. He completed his post-graduate diploma in Sound Recording and Engineering from the Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, Kolkata, in 2007, and holds a degree in Mechanical Engineering from Cochin University of Science and Technology (1998–2002).

Editor Praveen Prabhakar

Praveen Prabhakar is a film editor in Malayalam cinema, known for his sharp narrative sensibility and seamless, rhythm-driven editing style. His work is marked by a strong command over pacing, emotional layering, and storytelling clarity, making him a respected presence in contemporary Indian cinema.

He has edited several critically acclaimed films, including *Ustad Hotel*, *5 Sundarikal*, and *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, along with the documentary *Curry & Cyanide: The Jolly Joseph Case*. His recent and upcoming work includes *Padayathra*, the latest feature by veteran filmmaker Adoor Gopalakrishnan.



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