

Sutradhar

Institute of Dance & Related Arts



ARTIST STATEMENT

Anchored in three generations of the South Indian dance form Kuchipudi, the company reimagines South Asian myths and folklore to give voice to the historically silenced: women of color, people of indigenous origin, immigrants, and refugees. Drawing on poet saints such as 15th Century Kabir or fearless epic queens, the repertoire challenges hierarchy. Fleeing violence in India's Partition informs Nilimma Devi's passion to bring people to the place of dialogue through equity spoken in the language of soul across culture, ethnicity, creed, and color.

MISSION

Founded by Nilimma Devi in 1988, Sutradhar is an acclaimed performing group that sees the elasticity of tradition in its philosophic roots that hinge on questions of identity, peace and social justice. The company includes a core of highly trained Kuchipudi dancers and martial artists and works with collaborators from mediums across the board. Projects start with the seed of an idea and grow through each artist's embodied traditions to create new responses to the work. The group is innovative while preserving the lineage of this particular Andhra vani in highest standard of artistic excellence. Hand in hand with the community cornerstone Sutradhar Institute of Dance and Related Arts, Sutradhar Dance Company aims to uplift marginalized voices through a timeless art form and remind its audiences of our common humanity.



HISTORY

Founded in 1988 by Nilimma Devi, Sutradhar Dance Company is under the combined leadership of its Director Nilimma Devi, Artistic Director Anila Kumari and Choreographic Associate Riya Devi-Ashby (grandmother, daughter, granddaughter). Nilimma Devi is a celebrated pioneer in the field who immigrated to the US and began building a unique vision for dance education and performing arts. Anchored in the South Indian dance form of Kuchipudi, and drawing on the tradition of South Asian storytelling, the company has been hailed by the Washington Post as “hauntingly beautiful and has pushed the form forward with contemporary innovations.”

Since 1988, the company has explored the age-old question of identity and how to live, by taking on the most pressing issues of the day at the juncture of cultures, time and space. Our company members dancers have developed a sweeping versatility in motion as well as thought. Sitting in on panel discussions, speaking up on issues, and being informed about racial, caste and gender injustice, has made the company passionate and collaborative. Our dancers have performed at celebrated venues such as Dance Place, Strathmore Theater, The Kennedy Center, Osmania University, and more. Learn more at www.dancesidra.org.



Walk the Sky (2001)

Chor. Nilimma Devi

Celebrates the life and writings of 12th Century woman poet Mahadevi Akka who fought a forced marriage to the regional king. Refusing silence, she wrote criticizing social caste hierarchies, empty temple rituals shorn of love, while describing the beauty of Shiva.

"'Walk the Sky', a groundbreaking feminist work choreographed by Nilimma Devi and scripted by Anila Kumari, is poetry in motion... inviting personal artistic statement as it transcends the bounds of culture." - C.K. Arora, *India Today*



Mandala - A Voyage Within (2008)

Chor. Nilimma Devi, Khilton Nongmaithen, Anila Kumari

Based on the true story of Mettika, the Therigatha nun who lost her only child on the battlefield, this work sets Kuchipudi dance, Thang Ta martial arts inspired lunges and Tibetan mandala floor design together in a meditative journey.

From the Diary of Sita

Chor. Nilimma Devi

Script: Anila Kumari

An interdisciplinary exploration of a layered characterization of the epic heroine Sita. Utilizing shadow puppetry from Andhra folk tradition, and the hanging of saree panels suspended. Japanese Koto blended through Carnatic ragas of melancholy; bridging melodic cultures.



Sita, Gentle Warrior (Nov. 21-22, 2015)

Chor. Nilimma Devi, Anila Kumari, et al.

Sita is one of the most famous characters and archetypes in all of South Asia. The ideal wife and queen, the daughter of Mother Earth, she withstands years of exile, abduction, and even betrayal from those closest to her. Her gentility and quiet resistance has made her a symbol of feminine martyrdom, or, if you look closer at her story, triumphant perseverance. *Sutradhar Dance Company, Somapa Thai Dance Company, and Santi Budaya Indonesian Performing Arts* came together to craft a production exploring Sita's legendary qualities to parallel her life with women's issues today.



Weaving Life (Jan. 27-28, 2018)

Chor. Nilimma Devi, Anila Kumari, Khilton Nongmaithem

An intercultural exploration of weaving as a metaphor for the divine across Diné (Navajo), North Indian, and African American poetry.

My Ocean is Never Blue (2005)

Sutradhar Dance Company, Daniel Burkholder (The Playground), Arachne Aerial Arts, and Coyaba Dance Theater

An ambitious collaboration and critically acclaimed between four companies, this production highlighted water scarcity and environmental degradation. Sutradhar brought in a mythic dimension through the story of Ganga, the river goddess, and her journey to Earth.

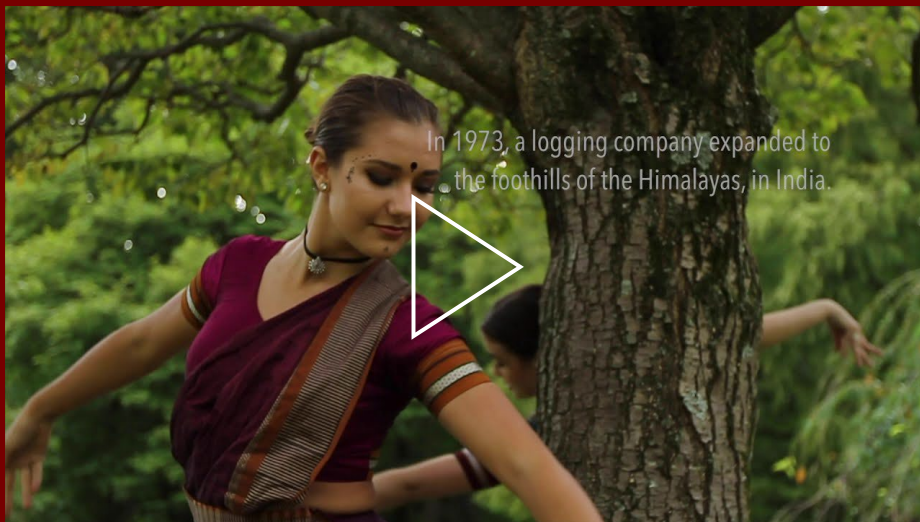


Blossoms Rained and There was Light (Nov. 15, 2008)

Chor. Nilimma Devi

Commissioned for the Freer Gallery's new collection of miniatures, this piece brought Tulsidas' Ramayan poetry into the classical Kuchipudi medium. The piece tells the story of the deity Ram's birth on Earth, and his mother Kausalya's pure love for him, even after she receives a vision of his true, incomprehensible form.





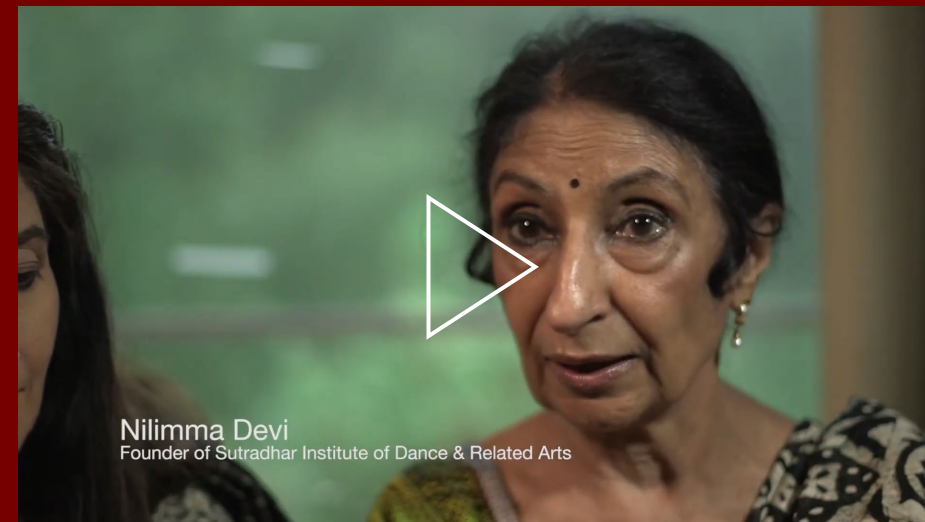
Why The Trees Dance (2019)

Chor. Nilimma Devi

Dir. Ellie Walton

Funded by: Wheaton Arts and Culture Grant

retells an inspiring narrative that occurred in 1973 India known as the 'Chipko' Movement. Unarmed women, who were at the lowest part of the caste system, wrapped their arms around the trees and successfully stopped commercial logging on their land.



Art of Soul at Sutradhar (2017)

Dir. Ellie Walton

An inside look at Sutradhar's training approach in combining Kuchipudi elements with the myths that underlie the tradition. This documentary features interviews with the founder Nilimma Devi as well as some of the young dancers of Sutradhar.

YOGINI

(2025, film dir. Ellie Walton)

Music produced by Asparagus Media

Chor. Anila Kumari, Nilimma Devi

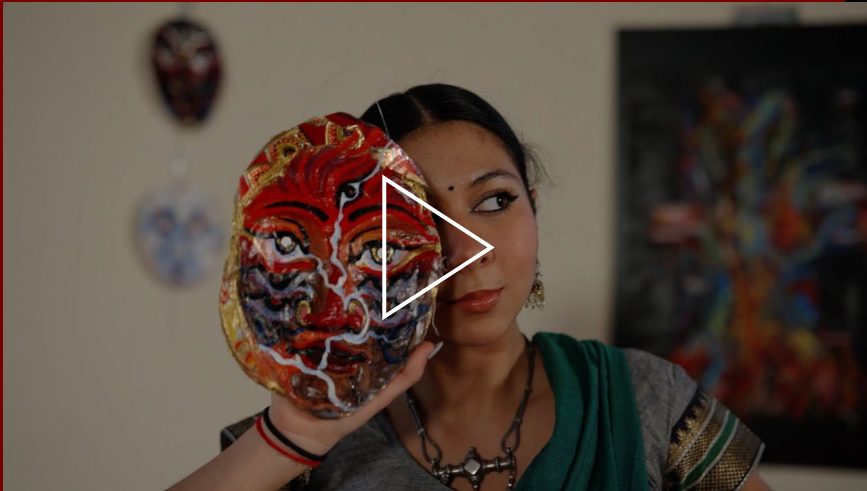
Artwork and Set Design by Riya Devi-Ashby

Soundtrack produced by Asparagus Media

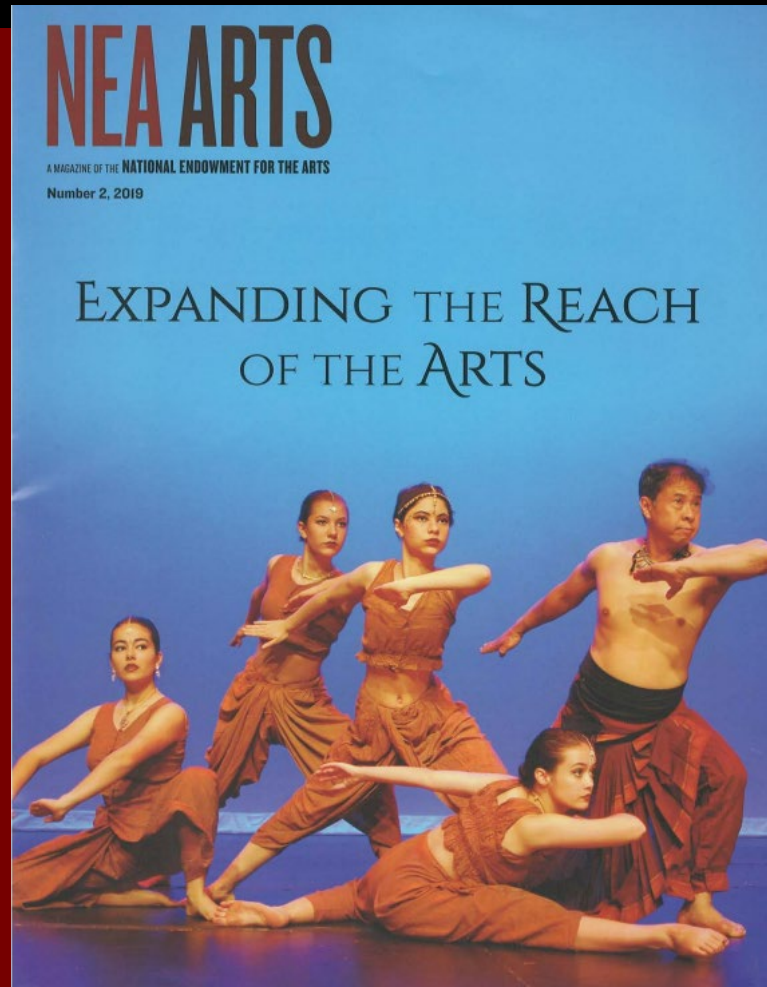
Myths told of blood-soaked battles, ferocious mothers protecting their children, our very world in jeopardy...

Do the 64 goddess myths of 3rd Ce. B.C. South Asia have a message for us today?

Born out of research into the goddess and dakini lore in South Asia, as well as our desire to honor the women activists before us and inspire the next generation, Yogini is an ambitious hybrid language of martial arts and Indian dance. Premiered at Sandy Spring Museum as part of the MoCo Lore, program, Yogini will be staged again at Black Box Theater, May 23, 2025.



PRESS



DANCE COMPANY

- ["Connecting Generations" by Jehan Narielvala, NEA Magazine \(2019\)](#)
- ["Threads of Life: A Collaboration of African American Spirituals and Indian Dance" by Isabel Hohenlohe, Smithsonian Folklife Festival, \(2023\)](#)
- ["From the Diary of Sita" by Anila Ashby \(2009\)](#)
- [Performing Arts, Barbara Allen, The Washington Post \(2009\)](#)
- [Performing Arts, Lisa Traiger, The Washington Post \(2000\)](#)
- ["Youth Fest's New Feats", by Lisa Traiger, The Washington Post, \(2000\)](#)
- ["Dance: The Art of Kuchipudi" by Alan Kriegsman, The Washington Post \(1989\)](#)

INSTITUTE/HISTORY

- ["Dance: The Childhood Love that Became Nilimma's Life" by Arshiya Sethi \(2017\)](#)
- ["The Revival of Indian Dance Since Independence" by Nilimma Devi](#)
- ["Kuchipudi Dance with Nilimma Devi" by Jeremy Michael](#)
- ["The Communal Embrace" by Nilimma Devi](#)
- ["A Touch of India" by Dr. Judith Lynne Hanna, Dance Teacher Now, \(1997\)](#)
- ["The Kuchipudi Dancer" by Anya Grenier, Bethesda Magazine \(2014\)](#)
- ["Transmission, Performance, and Identity in a Kuchipudi Dance Community in an American Suburb" by Cathy Kerst](#)
- [Nilimma Devi MSAC Councillor Profile](#)
- ["Special Feature: Lifetime Award Winner Nilimma Devi" by Joe Frandoni, AHCMC](#)

REVIEWS

- “...poetry in motion... inviting personal artistic statement as it transcends the bounds of culture.” -*C.K. Arora, India Today*
- Sutradhar Dance Company draws on traditional literary narratives of strength, self-dignity and awareness - “...provoking dialogue between custom and change...artistic and philosophical” - George Jackson, (danceviewtimes)
- “Not familiar with the Indian Classical Dance style Kuchipudi? Go see Devi Dance Theater anyway. The number and complexity of the movement vocabulary created by Nilimma Devi is so impressive that it never grew boring.” – *The Washington Post*
- “As the traditions of Indian Dance spread around the world, Nilimma Devi has been a custodian of its classical heritage and an innovator who has made the art form flourish in new fields” - *Washington Performing Arts Magazine*
- “The life breath of traditional Indian dance...Devi is busy building bridges between hearts, making connections between cultures and fostering appreciation in communities that are different yet occupying the same space.”- *Akhileshwari, Deccan Herald*
- “Devi, an expert in the southern Indian classical dance style known as Kuchipudi, has pushed the form forward. The kinetically powerful jumps...of martial artist Khilton Nongmaithen stood out against the delicate gestures and facial expressions integral to the dramatic form.” - *The Washington Post*
- “'Gossamer Of Soul' danced by Anila Kumari was a feast for the eyes. With intricate hand movements, she wove a fantasy fabric of invisible threads across the stage.”- *The Washington Post*
- "From depicting eroticism to defining beards, the codified hand gestures or hasta mudras have been reinterpreted. Nilimma Devi decodes the signs of our times.“ - *Nandini Krishna, Bombay Times*
- “It was sheer grace and virtuosity...interacting across new territories of knowledge, language and culture” -*Utpal K. Banerjee, The Hindu*



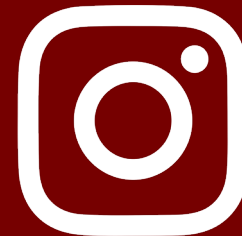
LOGOS AND MARKETING MATERIALS

 **Sutradhar**
Institute of Dance & Related Arts

 **Sutradhar**
Institute of Dance & Related Arts



www.facebook.com/dancesidra



www.instagram.com/dancesidra

COMPANY MEMBERS



Guru Nilimma Devi

Guru Nilimma Devi is a dancer, scholar, educator, and choreographer whose message of bridging cultures has spanned the globe. In 1988 she founded the Sutradhar Institute of Dance and Related Arts in Maryland, United States where she established Kuchipudi's rich dance drama curriculum as a haven for collaborative work and social justice.



Master Khilton Nongmaithem

Master Khilton Nongmaithem is renowned for Thang Ta, a rare martial arts tradition from Manipur, as well as his contributions to dance, theatre, and kinetic analysis. A disciple of the late Ojah Debabrata Sinam, he has trained in Thang-ta, Kalaripayattu, theater, and many other martial arts forms. Awarded the UNESCO, Aschberg Bursary in 1995, Khilton has been published in the Journal on Asian Martial Arts.



Associate Director Anila Kumari

Anila Kumari is an acclaimed dancer, scholar, and educator. Anila Kumari belongs to the artistic lineage and tradition of her mother and teacher, Nilimma Devi - and through her illustrious Kuchipudi gurus - Prahlad Vedantam Sarma, Jaganath Vedantam Sarma and Dr. Nataraja Ramakrishna. In Abhinaya technique, she studied with Priyadarshini Govind and Padmabhushan Kalanidhi Narayanan and has honed interpretive bhava.



Sophia Steckler

Dancer, writer and communications designer, Sophia Steckler is a lifelong disciple of the South Indian classical dance form of Kuchipudi. A passionate creative, she brings her training in classical guitar and jazz vocals to telling stories. Sophia attended the Washington Waldorf school and graduated with a BA from Oberlin College in May 2025 where she was part of a research team.



Riya Devi-Ashby

Riya Devi-Ashby trained for 19 years in Kuchipudi dance with renowned artists Nilimma Devi and Anila Kumari and has been training for the past 6 years in Thang-Ta martial arts with master Khilton Nongmaithem. She is a third-generation practitioner of Kuchipudi and has performed at storied venues such as the Smithsonian Museum of Asian Arts, Dance Place in DC, and more. She graduated from Wesleyan University in 2023 with a BA in Studio Art and is now Sutradhar's Program Manager.



Dora Slane

Dora Slane trained in the South Indian dance form of Kuchipudi as the disciple of guru Nilimma Devi. Her expressive technique unfolds thoughtfully as she explores layers of meaning embedded in myth and poetry of the dance number. Holding a BA in Dance and Philosophy from James Madison University DC and an MA in Contemporary Art Theory from Goldsmiths College London, Dora sees coherence between ancient artforms and its relevance today.



Maya Devi

Maya Devi has trained for over 17 years with guru Nilimma Devi. She has begun training in Thang Ta, an East Asian form of martial arts and is part of the third generation of Kuchipudi exponents in her family. She has performed at Dance Place in DC, Library of Congress, Black Box in Silver Spring, the Smithsonian Museum of Asian Art in DC, and more. Maya is pursuing her Bachelor of Liberal Arts at St. John's College in Annapolis and is an Assistant Montessori Instructor at Aquinas Montessori.

FUNDING

Sutradhar Dance Company's productions are made possible by generous funding from the MSAC, AHCDC, Wheaton Art and Cultural Grants, the Jamie Hulley Arts Foundation, private donors, and community support. We are almost fully grant and donation funded, and we are proud to continue to offer performances free of charge or at affordably priced rates - this is only possible through your generosity. To contribute to our work or commission a piece, please contact us at dancesidra@gmail.com.



CONTACT

- Central inquiries, press, and bookings:
 - dancesidra@gmail.com
- Anila Kumari, Choreographer and Director
 - anilaganga@gmail.com
 - [@anilaganga](#) on Instagram
- Riya Devi-Ashby, Choreographer and Program Manager
 - riya.c.ashby@gmail.com
 - [@riyadeviashby](#) on Instagram