


**Vol. X  
Number-1**

**ISSN 2319-7129**

**(Special Issue) February, 2018**

**UGC Notification No. 62981**



# **EDU WORLD**

**A Multidisciplinary International  
Peer Reviewed/Refereed Journal**



**APH. PUBLISHING CORPORATION**

# Guru Shri Kubernath Tanjorkar: The Maestro who Popularised Bharatanatyam

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Guru Shri Kubernath Tanjorkar (25 December 1921- 23 March 2007) was a great dance teacher, singer, *Nattuvnar*, choreographer, *mridangist* and a Philosopher. He was born in a place called Kuberbandari (Karnali), Chandod, in Gujarat. He was named Kubernath after the Presiding deity of the Temple Kuberbandari in Gujarat.<sup>1</sup> Guru Shri Kubernath Tanjorkar was born in the family of traditional musicians and dancers called '*Isai Vellalar*'. His grandfather Tangam Pillai, was a *Nattuvnar*, who belonged to Nagti village of Tamilnadu. Shri Kubernath Tanjorkar was born to Kanthimathi Amma (Ammal), who was a Bharatanatyam dancer and a great Sanskrit scholar in the Court of Baroda state. His father was Thanjavur Appaswami, who served as a *Nattuvnar* and *mridangist* in the Vadodara Palace.<sup>2</sup> His family members were one of the first pioneer dancers and dance teachers, who popularised Bharatanatyam in North India.

From a very tender age he was trained in Bharatanatyam dance style and vocal by his parents. When he was ten years of age he had learnt a full *margam* of Bharatanatyam dance.<sup>3</sup> He took advance training in Bharatanatyam and Nattuvangam from Shri Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai in Guru Shishya Parampara. He took intensive training in all the aspects of classical dance including Karnatic music and mridangam.<sup>4</sup>

He started teaching privately after finishing his training from Guru Shri Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. In 1941, he was appointed as Dance-teacher in 'Bhatkhande College of Music', Lucknow. From Lucknow he went to Salem, in Tamilnadu. In Salem he worked as a Music Director and Dance Director in 'Modern Theater'. He gave his services for two films 'Subhadra' and 'Tara'. He stayed there for one year.<sup>5</sup>

He came back to Vadodara and was appointed as 'Nattuvnar' in the Royal Court of Baroda State from 1948 to 1950. Later on he was appointed in the College of Indian Music, Dance and Dramatics in 1951. He gave his services in the Department of dance initially as a *mridangist* and later on as a Dance faculty for 30 years. He retired in 1981. In 1983 he established 'Tanjore Nritya Shala' to propagate Bharatanatyam dance style. In 1993 the public trust 'Tanjore Dance Music and Art Research Center' was established. He preserved and propagated 'Tanjore Bani' throughout his life.<sup>6</sup>

He trained many students during his life like Su. Shri. Prathibha Pandit, Smt. Elakshi Thakore, Shri Madhu Patel, Smt. Parul Patel, Smt. Juthika Mahen, Smt. Ami Patel, Smt. Smita Andhare, Smt. Gauri Apte, Smt. Avnindra Dixit, Smt. Chetana Pahade, Smt. Nanda Pahade, Smt. Rasmita Amin, Miss Kurangi Thakar, Smt. Vrunda Shukla and many more. He conducted *arangetrals* of many of his students. Many of his students like Smt. Elakshi Thakore and Shri Madhu Patel conducted the *arangetrals* of their students under his guidance. He gave advance training to many dancers. Many of his students are propagating his dance style in India and in other countries. They made history by propagating the Bharatanatyam dance style through their performances and teaching. They contributed in different fields and areas like teaching in school, colleges, universities and performing for television.

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He choreographed many traditional dance items as well as items in languages like Gujarati, Hindi, Sanskrit and Marathi. He, thus propagated Bharatanatyam and made it popular in Gujarat and other states of North India. He taught '*Tanjore Bani*'. His biggest contribution was to propagate, preserve and pass on the dance compositions of Tanjore Bani. He was a born artist, a great Guru, Nattuvnar and a Vaggeykar. As per Indian tradition definition *Gayan*, *Vadan* and *Nartan*, all these three aspects together make *sangeet*. He had imbibed all the knowledge of *Shastras* of Dance and all the aspects of *Gayan*, *Vadan* and *Nartan*. He was the one who was complete in all these three aspects and fulfilled the definition of *Sangeet*.

He was a very strict, sincere and hardworking teacher who would teach the minutest things as he himself believed in perfection and never let the things go unfinished. He emphasized in spontaneity and precision in *abhinaya* clarity in footwork. He emphasized on *Angasuddhi* (Perfection in postures) and *Saushthavang* (straight, erect body – keeping ears, shoulders and waist in one line – as per *shastras*).

He was such a giant personality who choreographed dance krutis (dance items or songs) like Sankshipta Bhagwat, Sankshipta Ramayan, Kirtanam 'Damaru Har Kar Baje', Kirtanam 'Bhukhana Bhujana Bhor', Adharam Madhuram and many more which are like milestones in the history of dance. One can see the depiction of entire epic and the Dignity of the Characters in the various *Sanchari Bhavas* through his choreography. The audience in all his programmes would be spell bound by his orchestration i.e. the combination of his singing and all the musical instruments played including *nattuvangam*.

According to Smt. Juthika Mahen 'I remember people having tears in their eyes while listening the singing of *padas* like 'Kem Re Visari O Van Na Vihari' where Radha is in painful condition due to separation from her beloved Krishna. The music connoisseurs, the dance lovers still remember him not only for his singing and overall effect but also for the 'Feel' they had at those particular moments'. According to Shri Mahen Hajarnis his choreography always had a drama and this drama was always interconnected to reality. His choreography would make you so engrossed and become one with the dancer and feel that, the episode depicted in the dance is just happening in front of you. You will become a part of the episode through the dance performance.

He choreographed many Bharatanatyam items in languages like Gujarati, Hindi, Marathi and Sanskrit which were easily understood by people in North India. This was his very big contribution in making Bharatanatyam popular in Gujarat and North India, where people do not understand South Indian languages.

According to Prof. Dwarkanath Bhosle he was a singer of a very high level. He had knowledge of Karnatic music style and Hindustani music style. He had knowledge of 400 ragas. He had *Sangeet* deep in his nerves, he lived and breathed *music*. He had an ability to make the poetry come alive by singing was beyond belief. The same feeling that the poet has expressed in the poetry or lyrics, he expressed through his singing. When the dancer did *Abhinaya* on his singing, the result was pure *Satvika bhava* to be experienced. Such was the greatness about his singing, handling and conducting the recital. He had a wonderful, deep and rich baritone voice (*buland awaz*). He could sing well at a very low and a very high pitch.

When a Dance recital was conducted by him it used to be like great event which mesmerized and hypnotized the audiences and would leave a lifelong impression in their memory. His music composition was never complicated. He never made music difficult. The overall effect of the *Nattuvangam* and his singing was something very different and magnificent. His *nattuvangam* was always so vigorous and thrilling Even when he took class or rehearsal, the effect of his *nattuvangam*, the melody of singing, the rhythm, the sound of his *Tattakali* and harmonium, all these factors created a remarkable atmosphere.. His recitation of *Tirmaanams* was amazing and astounding. When he

sang in a class in the College, people used to stand in the parking to listen. Other people who were in other classes also enjoyed his singing. All the aspects of his personality were interconnected and complimented one another.

He taught the details of *Tāla* in class as he had a deep understanding and control over the *Tāla*. He demonstrated very minute details of *abhinaya* to his students. He demonstrated different gaits very brilliantly. He demonstrated the movements of animals like snake and an elephant amazingly. According to Smt. Juthika Mahen he could demonstrate Abhinaya so brilliantly because of his interest of going in detail till roots to get perfection in whatever he is doing, so he would go to *Haathi khana* and observe elephants for hours. He would watch the minutest movement of elephant. He was, therefore, able to recreate the movements of animals and different expressions very well. Same way he demonstrated brilliantly characters like Gopi, Krishna etc. If he demonstrated a male character he would walk like a male. When he demonstrated a female character, he would walk like a female. There was a lot of detailing in his teaching. Sometimes he would explain one line for two to three hours. He would tell stories related to the line that he is teaching. Sometimes, while teaching a gesture, he would take two to three hours. He tried to teach the minutest detail of the subject that he was teaching. Thus, his students got a basic understanding and clarity of technique of dance in his class. All his students had a heavenly experience to do *abhinaya* when he sang. We also got the freedom to express in *abhinaya* items with him. As a teacher he taught students according to their ability. He never made students nervous. He raised the level of knowledge of students by slowly giving them knowledge of dance.

He was a born artist. For him *Kala*, *Tāla*, *Laya*, *Gayan* were spontaneous. He appeared effortless in choreographing the dance or composing the music. He would start choreographing some item and spontaneously a wonderful creation will emerge. Guru Shri Kubernath felt, understood and lived the philosophy, the divine characters like Krishna, Rama and so on; he knew the *Shastras*. He lived and felt Tukaram, Narsinh Mehta, Surdas, Kabeer and so on and many saints and philosophers with their *kritis*, *padas*, *dohas*, *chhandas*, *shlokas* of Sanskrit and tamil texts etc. on the tip of his tongue.

He was a great Guru. Extremely versatile. Right till the end of his life, he taught Dance.

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# Contributions of Guru Smt. Anjali Merh in the Development of Bharatanatyam Dance

Jalpa Patel\*

Guru Smt. Anjali Merh was a very talented and gifted artist from the childhood. Her interest in dance started, when as a child she started taking training in the Kathak dance style. Her parents saw her interest and talent in dance, and so when Rukmini Devi started Kalakshetra in 1944, they sent her to Kalakshetra for the training in Bharatanatyam dance style. She was a very talented and hardworking student and had a keen interest to learn all the aspects of Bharatanatyam dance.<sup>1</sup>

Guru Smt. Anjali Merh was one of the first students to graduate from Rukmini Devi's Kalakshetra in Chennai. She was also a first Gujarati girl to graduate from Kalakshetra. In Kalakshetra she was very fortunate to take training under maestros of Bharatanatyam dance like Guru Shri Chokkalingam Pillai, Guru Shri Dandayuddha Pillai, Guru Shri Karaikkal Saradambal and Rukmini Devi herself.<sup>2</sup>

Smt. Anjali Merh took training also in the art of singing i.e. Karnatic music, Nattuangam, choreography and she also learnt to speak, read and write Tamil language and imbibed Tamil culture. She excelled as a student in all the aspects of dance like nritta, abhinaya and nattuangam. She was a gifted singer. She was a rare combination of dancer and singer, and she use to say "Learning vocal makes a dancer soulful". She learnt the art of make-up, costume designing, stage designing while participating and performing in the dance dramas choreographed at Kalakshetra. She also did her arangatral at the Kalakshetra which was mentored by Smt. Rukmini Devi.

After finishing Diploma at the Kalakshetra in 1947, she took teaching experience also at Kalakshetra and groomed herself as a good teacher of Bharatanatyam dance style.<sup>3</sup>

According to Smt. Anjani Arunkumar later on she started an academy of dance "Rukmini Kalavihar" for the propagation of Bharatanatyam dance style in Mumbai. She also became the first principal of the 'Nartan Skikshapith', the dance section of the Bharatiya Vidhya Bhavan in Mumbai.

In 1953, Smt. Anjali Merh got married to Dr. Sukumar Merh and she shifted to Baroda, making Baroda her field of work. Smt. Hansa Mehta who was the Vice Chancellor of The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, on seeing her talent and expertise, invited her to join the Department of Dance as a visiting faculty. Later on she joined the Department as a full time faculty. She was the head of the department from 1964 to 1979. According to Dr. Mallika Sarabhai in Gujarat she also gave her services in the Institutions like 'Darpana' of Smt. Mrinalini Sarabhai, where she went as a visiting faculty to teach theory and abhinaya darpana. She invited eminents like the legendary Mrinalini Sarabhai for lectures on Dance in the department of dance of The M.S. University of Baroda.

According to Smt. Sandhya Munger who is a student of Smt. Anjali Merh, she was a spontaneous choreographer. She inherited the gift of writing her own lyrics from her mother Smt. Mugdha Hora, who was a poetess. Smt. Anjali Merh would write her own lyrics and choreograph it. She did many bold experiments in dance and took Bharatanatyam to a greater level. She even choreographed many items in Hindi, Gujarati, Sanskrit, Assamese, and Marathi which helped students relate to the item and helped the audiences who did not understand south Indian languages to understand Bharatanatyam better. The credit of creating a Gujarati Margam and creating a Kuravanji in Gujarati in Bharatanatyam dance style goes to her. Because of this Bharatanatyam was appreciated and understood by the

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people of Gujarat, more girls were inspired and motivated to learn the Bharatanatyam dance style. Many girls of good families joined the Department of Dance because of Smt. Anjali Merh.

She composed many dance dramas like Shachi Paolomi, Radha nu Shamnu, Natir Puja, Sthulibhadra, Kosha, Sudama Charitra, Ramayana, Shri Chandramauliswara Kuruwanji and Navagraha. During her tenure at The M.S. University. She trained many students at the Diploma, Degree, Masters and Ph.D. level. Her students are settled in different parts of world and are spreading and propagating the knowledge of Bharatanatyam that they learnt from Smt. Anjali Merh. Some of her students who are doing good work in the field of Bharatanatyam are Anjani Arunkumar in Bombay, Sandhya Mungar in Mauritius, Dr. Francis Barboza in U.S.A, Tani Desai in Baroda, Kanan Amin in Baroda, Dr. Parul Shah in Baroda, Ambika Shridhar in Australia, Menaka Thakkar and Sudha Khandwala in Canada, Padma Subramaniam in U.S.A, Jeethy Menon in Trivendrum, Anjani Kumar in Bombay, Purna Killawala in Pune, Manik Ambikai in Pune, Kalarani Iyer in Madurai, Nirva Shah in U.S.A and many more.<sup>4</sup>

Smt. Anjali Merh guided Smt. Jayanti Chandolkar and Shri Sunil Kothari for their Ph.D. thesis. Smt. Anjali Merh wrote two books on dance "Nartan Darshika" and "Chandramaulishwara Kuruwanji". These books were used like textbooks by the students of dance. It was a very big contribution in that period, as during that time there were very few books written on dance.

According to her student Smt. Jeethy Menon, she was a very good human being, very hardworking teacher who wanted to give all her knowledge to her students. She was also a very strong willed woman, which she proved when she choreographed and staged the production 'Navagraha' inspite of being warned by some artists not to choreograph the composition. After the Navagraha production was staged, Smt. Anjali Merh passed away on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1979 due to heart attack. She was honoured posthumously by Government of Gujarat with Gaurav Puraskar.<sup>5</sup>

Thus till the last day of her life, she was working hard for the development of Bharatanatyam dance style.

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