

## CHAPTER - VI

### DANCE DRAMAS OF RUKMINI DEVI

#### SCOPE AND TECHNIQUE

To Rukmini Devi Bharata Natya includes all forms of dances and dance-dramas which are in accordance with the Shashtra as laid down by the Sage Bharata, and is a comprehensive word to include dance-dramas like Bhagvatmela Natakam and Kuchipudi. According to her 'Even other forms of dancing like Kathakali and Manipuri are obviously variations of Bharata Natya, though they have changed in character in accordance with the environment and the atmosphere of the surroundings. Bharata Natya is a composite art. It is at the same time the art of the stage, drama, music, poetry, colour and rhythm.' It was with this conviction, Rukmini Devi enlarged the rather narrow scope of Bharata Natya to a much broader base, and in doing this, she experimented with the technique by producing dance-dramas in Bharata-Natya. Today when almost all Bharata Natya exponents are presenting dance-dramas, few realise that it was Rukmini Devi who was the first to take the bold initiative several decades back. To her goes the entire credit of composing and presenting for the first time dance-dramas in Bharata Natya and allied styles. By a harmonious blending of Nritta and Abhinaya, she could very successfully accomp-

lish artistic narration of various religious themes through dance. In doing so, she nowhere departed from tenets of Natya Shastra.

A scientific and critical analysis of Rukmini Devi's dance dramas, reveals following special features:-

1. An ideal combination of the various elements of drama (Natya) as enunciated by Bharata.
2. A blending of Bharata Natya and Kathakali styles.
3. Sophisticated presentation of ~~folk~~ dance-dramas like Kuravanji, Kuchipudi and Bhagvat Mela Natak.
4. Scope for all the four types of Abhinaya, predominance of the Angika and Aharya Abhinaya with occasional use of Vachika and Satvika Abhinaya.
5. Compositions based on the original Sanskrit texts.
6. Male and female dancers both participating and playing the respective roles.

According to Rukmini Devi, Kathakali follows Bharata's texts and could not be considered an alien art, and should be fully utilised in enriching the Bharata Natya style. It was with this conviction that she introduced many aspects of Kathakali in her dance-dramas, such that her choreography and

presentation amply reflects a harmonious blending of the two distinct dance styles. In her dance-dramas, thus

- (1) While most of the gestures, and movements are of Bharata Natya, quite a few belong to Kathakali to suit the roles of the actors.
- (2) While female characters follow Bharata Natya, the male characters if their role so requires, perform in Kathakali style. In a general way wherever the act requires forceful and vigorous movements, Kathakali has been preferred.
- (3) She has appropriately used the Kathakali style of facial expressions and make up, if the role is much like that of a demon or a monkey. (Please refer Plate VI 11).

It is interesting to note that while the Bharata Natya (or to be more precise the Solo Sadir Attam) was exclusively performed by females, the folk dance-drama forms like Kuchipudi and Bhagvat Mela Natak, on the other hand had no place for females. The female roles were also enacted by male dancers. Rukmini Devi brought about a change in this practice. She trained male dancers in Bharata Natya, and used them for appropriate roles in her dance dramas. This was quite an important contribution and a marked departure from the prevalent traditions. In all the dance-dramas produced by her,

She has made ample use of male and female dancers to depict respective roles. By borrowing some gestures from Kathakali and also by innovating new gestures, she has produced a number of dance-dramas based on traditional dance-drama form as well as on various Sanskrit classics. Her contribution to the revival of dance-drama tradition includes (1) Kuravanji (2) Bhagvat Mela Natak and (3) Dance-dramas based on devotional stories from Ramayana, Bhagvatha, Kalidas, Jaydev etc.

#### KURAVANJI

Kuravanji dance-dramas essentially comprise the elements of both classical as well as folk dances, and this dance-drama form could be taken to be as ancient as the Solo Sadir Natyam. Little is known about the **exact** origin of this dance form, and till very recently it was almost a forgotten dance drama form.

Of late, considerable research has been done on Kuravanji, and many authors have brought out valuable information about this dance-drama of Tamil Nad. All evidences point to the Kuravanji to be a 'popular and less classical' dance form, combined with dramatic element 'performed in the temples by Devdasis. It is not correct to consider the present Kuravanji as the dance-drama of gypsies of South India. Rina Singh<sup>29</sup> has written that, Kuravanji was the dance-drama performed by

Kuravs (gypsies) who moved about from place to place and put up their shows for the recreation of the villagers. This is an erroneous statement and she appears to have been misinformed. A more appropriate and rather convincing origin of Kuravanji has been given by Ragini Devi.<sup>30</sup> According to her Kuravanji once prevailed all over Andhra and Tamilnad (the two being a single cultural unit historically). She writes "It was a custom to entertain pilgrims who visited local shrines with a dance called Kuravanji, that derives its name from the Kurava gypsy tribe of the hilly regions. Anji means step-hence dance mode of the Kuravas. The principal characters are Singi, a fortune teller and Singadu her consort, accompanied by a drummer who sings the theme. Singhi and Singadu are supposed to be Siva and Parvati in the guise of wandering gypsies. Other characters, introduced later on were a stage director (Sutradhara) and a buffoon (Konangi)."

Though the Kuravanji described by Ragini Devi is somewhat different from the traditional Kuravanjis performed by the Devdasis in the temples of Tamilnad, but it is quite obvious that this dance-drama form had a wider prevalence in ancient and medeavel times. One could also conclude that Kuravanji originated in smaller temples in the form of a folk art and later on developed into a classical dance-drama form, perfected by the Devdasis of Tanjore. Thus to-day, the

Kuravanjis are well-known dance-dramas, performed in Tanjore temples by Devdasis. Of course in contrast to the highly sophisticated classically rigid Solo Bharata-Natya, Kuravanji combines considerable folk elements and obviously it was performed with a view to cater to the common man.

Like its solo classical dance counterpart, originally Kuravanji must have been absolutely devotional in character. According to Premalatha<sup>31</sup> this dance-drama form lost its religious and devotional elements and gradually became dedicated to humans such as Rajaraja Chola (985 - 1014 A.D.), the Great Raja Sarfoji II (1800 - 1832 A.D.). She writes -

"Though there are many Kuravanjis known in literature except for Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji, till recently performed annually at Tanjore, the others remain only as survivals of a literary form. In other words, so much has this dance-drama decayed and for such decay we have to point the finger at the change over of the hero from the imperishable god, the creator to the perishable man the created"

Kuravanjis have a stock theme of a lady falling in love with the king, minister or a noble of the place (Sthala) or with the presiding deity of the local temple. When the local deity becomes object of love the description as given in the Kuravanjis is of the god in the act of being

taken out in a procession with all glamour regalia and paraphernalia. Finally she attains the object of her love. The pangs of her love are portrayed vividly. Her plight gives the poet the opportunity to portray love pranks such as the lady ~~addressing~~<sup>addressing</sup> Manmatha, and her Sakhis and attendant maids entreating to go and persuade the hero to come to her. A gypsy woman (Kurati) appears on the scene at last, reads the palm of the heroine and predicts that her long cherished desire will soon be fulfilled. The heroine gives her valuable presents. The happy union ultimately takes place.

" Kurvanjis can be classified on the basis of the music, those with high class music, medium music and light. The ragas employed in most of them are rakti ragas with genuine folk tunes occurring occasionally. A lively dance atmosphere is maintained at suitable places by rythmical self passages interwoven in between the Sahityas. By rythmical solfa passages interwoven in between the Sahityas, we mean sequences of jatis known as Korvai or tirmanam which when rendered well, grip the attention of the audience. Some of the songs reveal spicy humour creating a lively interest in the audience.<sup>31</sup>"

As Kurvanji involves a number of characters, it has considerable dramatic interest. The gypsy woman is the

real heroine of the ballet and there is scope for dance in light ~~v~~<sup>e</sup>n with lilting tunes and rythm.

There have been more than twenty such Kuravanjis in vogue in the past. The oldest extant Kuravànji is the Kutrala Kuravanji, composed by Tirukuda Rajappa Kaviriyar in the 18th century and performed yearly in a temple at Tirukuttralam till seventy years ago. The only other Kuravanji still performed in praise in a temple is the Sarfoji Kuravanji in praise of the Maharaja of Tanjore which is produced every year in the Tanjore temple.

As stated earlier, the revival of Kuravanji is much due to Rukmini Devi. She realised that this almost extinct dance-drama form had considerable artistic and literary<sup>material</sup> and in early 1945 with the active support of the great musician Veenai Krishnamacharya, she produced Kutrala Kuravanji. The noted Tamil scholar Shree Chidambarnatha Mudaliar was instrumental in getting Rukmini Devi interested in Kuravanji.

Rukmini Devi's production of this Kuravanji was a landmark. It won acclaim from all quarters. Following review appearing in the Kalakshetra report.<sup>32</sup> of 1961, has been included here verbatim to give the reader an idea



of Rukmini Devi's contribution to the revival of Kuravanji.

'The composition of the dance-drama was completed in eleven days and, when it was presented for the first time, it was a revelation to the people. It is true that, in the past Kuravanjis had been enacted in temples but those days were over though there was a relic of the old days in Tanjore where the Sarabhendra Bhupala Kuravanji was performed in the great temple. This, from a literary point of view, was an inferior Kuravanji and while occasionally there were good dancers taking part, there was no attempt at dramatic production. The costumes were bad when Rukmini Devi produced Kutrala Kuravanji, herself taking the central part, for the first time in this generation, people saw the possibilities and potentialities of the dance-drama. This production also paved the way for the entrance of the dance-drama, of which we see so many today, on the scene.'

Rukmini Devi personally edited the whole text to suit the presentation in a neat dance-drama, and avoid unnecessary length. Her imaginative choreography brought about a unique blending of the classical dance with visual appeal and dramatic element (Plate VI 1). Her Nayak never came on the stage but his description given by Kattiakkaran, Sakhis and Nayika through dance, very adequately made his presence effective. Rukmini Devi further took considerable

PLATE VI. 1

A Scene from Kuttrala Kuravanji

pains to avoid all cheap and vulgar elements. A grotesque almost caricature like portrayal of Kurathi entering with rolling hips, chewing betel leaf, making faces and exaggerated gestures, has been totally eliminated. On the other hand, graceful dance movements of groups as well as Solo, the entries and exits, all well thought out and enhanced the beauty of the production.

This Kuravanji was repeated in all the places to which Rukmini Devi went. Press notices are too numerous to include. Mention must however be made of two appreciations of this Kuravanji when it was first produced. 'Times of India'<sup>33</sup> wrote 'Kuravanjis were old, Tamil dramas which, through lack of patronage, had lost their spiritual qualities. It was Rukmini Devi who undertook to raise these decadent dramas to their classical status. Kuttrala Kuravanji represents her first triumph in this endeavour. It portrays the yearning of the soul for the infinite.

Through her creative imagination, she has made of the Kurvanji a thing of beauty, which can be enjoyed not only by those who know Tamil and can therefore appreciate the high poetic beauty of the songs but by anyone who has an eye or an ear for the beautiful.'

After witnessing the performance of Kutrala Kuravanji in March 1951 in the temple of Kutralam, Shree Chidambarnatha Mudaliar<sup>34</sup> wrote as under --

'You have now returned to Kalakshetra after having achieved conquest of the Tamil country. With ease you have performed a great task. The enacting of the Kuravanji in its own home, the temple at Kutralam, is one of the greatest experiences of my life. For twenty years this Kuravanji has been my constant companion. It has been with me on my journeys. The beauty of the Tamil and the spirit of poetry have always produced in me a sense of amazement. But it was only when I saw you and your pupils dance the Kuravanji to the accompaniment of the sweet music of your musicians that I realized its full enchantment. The dance took me to another world from whence it was difficult to return. Surely the goal you set for yourself when you started to learn Natya has been fulfilled at Kutralam. Your great devotion has surely been accepted by the Lord of Kutralam. The Tamil country has received an illumination. May Kalakshetra live through you.'

Rukmini Devi produced three Kuravanji dance-dramas - each with distinct themes and devotional aspects. Her first production as already stated was Kutrala Kuravanji--where she revived the most noted and ancient

Kuravanji. For the first time, this Kuravanji was performed outside the temple. It included both male and female characters, and the dance story was narrated to the audience through 'Katiyakaran' - some times one and some times two. The dance style was essentially Bharata-Natya, but had a light touch. The music too though classical had a blending of folk tunes. In composing this Kuravanji, Rukmini Devi took help from Karaikal Shardambal, a noted Devdasi of her time and who was later on teaching at Kalakshetra.

Rukmini Devi made appropriate changes in costumes also. Traditionally, the Devdasis while performing a Kuravanji, did not introduce any variation in the costume. The usual Sadir Natya dress was worn by most female participants including the Kurati. Rukmini Devi instead introduced the typical South Indian Sari-Shungani. For Kurati, she designed a skirt instead of the usual costumes or saree. Her hairdo was also typically that of a gypsy woman--Kurati--a bun on one side of the head (Kondai).

The other two noted Kuravanjis produced by Rukmini Devi are Kannapar Kuravanji and Krishnamari Kuravanji.

The Kannapar Kuravanji depicts the story of a hunter prince Thinappar who renounces all his worldly pursuits and dedicates himself to Lord Siva. Perhaps this traditional

Kuravanji is the only one which pertains to a male devotee of Lord Shiva (Plate VI 2).

Kannapar Kuravanji was written by Markanda Navatur of Thozhuvur in 1880 and published in Madras in 1887. According to Rukmini Devi this work was in the style known as 'Kuravanji--Pan--Kirtanam', indicating that it was intended to be used as dance-drama, singing or for Katha Kalakshepam. In her production, Rukmini Devi, added a few verses from Sekkizhar's Periya Puranam of the 12th Century.

Rukmini Devi, was in the beginning, quite reluctant to produce another Kuravanji. In her own words<sup>35</sup> 'When I was asked by the Sangita Natak Sangham to produce another Kuravanji, I was reluctant to do so for two reasons. The first was that I had already produced a Kuravanji. Secondly, I find that the themes in all Kuravanjis are identical. Finally, I accepted the proposal of the Sangham hoping that I could do something different. When Sri R. Visvanatha Aiyer of the Dr. Swaminatha Iyer library told me of the Kannapar Kuravanji, I decided to produce this. It is a beautiful and dramatic story of a hunter finding illumination through his devotion, who though born to a lowly life, becomes purified so that he becomes a Saiva Saint and an example of Saivam--harmlessness and compassion. It is also a real Kuravanji because all the characters in it except one are Kuravas, hunters and gypsies.'



PLATE VI. 2

A Scene from Kannapar Kuravanji - Thinnapar  
placing his left foot near the wounded eye  
of Lord Shiva

'The language is a mixture of classical and colloquial Tamil purposely written so by the author. So the music and dance are also equally a mixture of the folk and the classical style according to the spirit of the paly'' (Plate VI 3).

The Krishnamari Kuravanji produced by Rukmini Devi in December 1971 was specially written by Sri Devi Karumari Dasarq<sup>4</sup>  
~~Amman~~ Temple of Tiruverkadu for Rukmini Devi. As described in the reports of Kalakshetra<sup>36</sup>.

'The story centres around the heroine Madan Valli pining for Lord. A gypsy reads her palm and predicts victory in her mission. The lyrics by Sri Devi Karumari Dasar had only the bare outline. Immense research was needed to transform them into mime. There had to be an organic evolution of the ballet and this she achieved by padding the central theme with innumerable sequences.'

'The introduction of the Sakhis, the ushering of the gypsy, the rituals connected with palm reading, the pangs of separation of Madan Valli and the final triumphant denouncement in which the Jeevathma is submerged in the Parmathma in symbolic Nayaki-Nayaka alignment, revealed competence in conception.'



PLATE VI. 3

A scene from Kannapa Kuravanji - A Group  
dance composition combining folk (Lokdharmi)  
and classical (Natyadharmi) abhinayas

'The gypsy scene normally much abused in ballets these days, was done with great dignity and refinement. The fortune teller beckons Madan Valli to arrange for the samakriyas (pre-requisites) for invoking the blessings of Karumari. The dancers brought them in graceful gait one by one. Even the gypsy dance was polished with none of the cabaret monstrosities thrown in for mass appeal.'

The most unusual feature of this Kuravanji was the Nag Natanam of Karumari Amman which was a break from the common run of Kuravanji presentation in as much as the deity is made to come in person to lead the love sick soul to its union with the Lord. This deviation was, perhaps introduced to respect the feeling of the large number of devotees of Karumari Amman (Plate VI 4).

#### EXPERIMENTS IN BHAGVATA MELA AND KUCHIPUDI

Bhagvata Mela and Kuchipudi are the two dance-drama forms of Bharata Natya. Both have obviously a common origin, having originated in Andhra. Historical records, point to the fact that the dance-drama traditions of Andhra, in the course of time developed into the Solo repertoires and Bhagvat Mela of Tamil Nad. Since 500 B. C., Andhra had cultural contacts with the Tamils of the far South and with the Aryan Kingdoms, south of the Ganges river.

The origin and evolution of these dance-drama forms





A scene from Krishnamari Kuravanji - Goddess  
Krishnamari Amman blessing the devotees

have been appropriately summarised by Ragini Devi<sup>37</sup>  
in her book on Indian Dance ---

"The Krishna cult was propagated in Andhra at the beginning of the 14th century by Narahara Tirtha, a saint from Kalinga (Orissa). In order to spread his spiritual message of Bhakti Marga, the path of devotion to god, he brought dancers from Kalinga to sing and dance the Gita Govinda, a classical Sanskrit poem of the mystic love of Krishna and Radha, composed by Jayadeva, a saintly poet. This beautiful erotic poem, its musical mode and its language of gestures were taught to Devadasis and Raja-nartakis at Srikakulam. Songs of adoration to Krishna and his beloved Radha, and a dance-drama, Sri Krishna Jalakrida, were composed by Gopal Krishna Saraswati, a disciple of Narahari Tirtha at Srikakulam. Thus the Krishna cult became a popular form of worship that gave more importance to song and dance than to rituals.

" Under the influence of Vaishnavism or worship of Vishnu and Krishna, Brahman devotees composed dance-dramas having as their source episodes from the holy Bhagvata Purana. The plays were staged at temple festivals as a holy offering to popularize religion: hence these actors were known as Bhagvatas or holy devotees, and their form

of dramatic art was called Bhagvata Mela. Their gurus were experts in the mimetic gesture language and dance modes of the Natya Sastra tradition. One of these groups of Brahman actors was living in Kuchipudi village in Divi Taluq.

" The region of Divi Taluq where Kuchipudi village is situated has been the centre of music and dance for many Centuries. The name Kuchipudi is a contracted form of Kuchila-puri, the village of actors (derived from the Sanskrit Kusilava-puram). The Kusilavas were wandering bards who sang and enacted episodes from the Ramayana epic. The itinerant actors living in Kuchipudi village came to be known as Kucheelu (actors). The descendants of the Kuchipudi Bhagvatas are still practising their art in this village and the surrounding area.

" During the reign of the Vijaynagar emperor, Vira Narasimha Raya, dramatic troupe of Brahman Bhagvatas from Kuchipudi village staged a dance-drama at the royal court. The Machupali Kaifat, a local chronicle of 1502, records the fact as well as the King's remark that Kuchipudi Bhagvatas were well known for their art. It may be assumed that the Bhagvata Mela dance-drama had been in existence in this village for at least two hundred years prior to that time, though there is no earlier reference to Kuchipudi Bhagvatas.

The rulers of the Vijayanagar empire (1336 to 1565 A.D) were great patrons of religion and the arts. They attracted to their capital Vijayanagar (the city of Victory) scholars, poets, musicians and dancers. The Vijayanagar empire was founded in 1336 A.D. to guard South India from the invasions of Islam. This empire became rich and powerful and ruled over the Tamil Kingdoms of the South for more than two Centuries. The Andhra Nayaks appointed to rule at Tanjore extended patronage to musicians and dancers from Andhra at the royal court.

" After the downfall of Vijayanagar in 1565 and the complete destruction of the magnificent city by the Muslims, poets, musicians, dance masters, court dancers and actors of Andhra sought patronage at Tanjore court. Five hundred Brahman Bhagvata families migrated to Tanjore from Andhra and were given a village and lands by the pious King Achyutappa Nayak for the maintenance of their dramatic art. The village was named Achyutapuram in honour of their royal patron (The same village is now called Melatur). These Bhagvatas must have been staging Telugu dance-dramas in their own village and elsewhere in the Tanjore kingdom.

" The Bhagvatas of Kuchipudi continued to reside in their ancestral village and they are now the sole custodians of the dance-drama and dance traditions of Andhra.

" Thus the Kuchipudi of Andhra and Bhagvat Mela Natak of Tamil Nad have obviously a common origin, and to a certain extent the themes, script and techniques are also identical. Of course the two dance-drama forms having developed in <sup>a</sup>separate cultural areas, in course of time, have acquired regional characteristics and have grown into quite distinct forms.

" In these two dance-drama forms of Bharata Natya, unlike the Sadir Natya and the Kuravanji only men take part. 'Though all the four types of Bharata Natya were at the outset associated with Bhakti and were performed in temples only, the Sadir and Kuravanji ~~later~~ on came to be used for secular purposes as well. The Rajas of places like Tanjore and Madurai were great patrons of the arts and it flattered them to have Sadir Natya Varnams and Kuravanjis written in their honour. Again while the Sadir Natya and Kurvanji were performed mainly at Shiva temples and were based mainly on Shaivite themes, the Kuchipudi and Bhagvatmela were performed exclusively at Vishnu temple and were based mainly on Vaishnavite themes. Another point of distinction is that while the teachers, the conductors and the artistes in the Sadir and Kuravanji--that is, the Nattuvanars and Devdasis ~~are~~ were non Brahmins, the teachers, the conductors and the artistes in Bhagvatmela and Kuchipudi--that is the Bhagvatars and Bhagvatulus ~~are~~ were all exclusively Brahmins',<sup>38</sup>.

The Bhagvata Mela Nataka and Kuchipudi are arts with the sentiment of devotion permeating literally every aspect of them. They came into existence in the 15th or 16th Century, a time which marks an important mile stone in the spread of the Cult of Bhakti. They can thus be said to be a product of the Bhakti movement itself. Like the Keertanas, Harikathas and Kalakshepams, these dance-dramas too helped to arouse the consciousness of the people to matters divine. Two persons of that period are credited with having created these arts by bringing about a synthesis of music, dance and drama for the specific purpose of expounding the philosophic truths of the epics and the puranas. These two luminaries, both ascetics, were Tirtha Narayana Yati and Sidhyendra Swami Yogi. Unlike other saints of their and even of a later age, these Yogis were of the conviction that Bhakti to god when done through music was good, but that it was still better if done through the combined arts of music, dance and drama. They thus started a movement by which Bhaktas began to approach their god by singing, dancing and acting in His honour. The themes they used for this purpose were borrowed mostly from the Bhagvata lore, hence these Bhakta-artistes came to be known as Bhagvatars in Tamil Nad and Bhagvatulus in Andhra.<sup>39</sup>

Kuchipudi dance-drama takes its name from the village Kuchipudi in Andhra Pradesh, where it originated. Sidhyendra Yogi



stayed here and worshipped at the temple of Ramalingeshwara. It was at this village that he, with the help of the boys and young men, created the dance-drama technique and presented it for the first time. Since then, for the last 300 years, the Brahmin families of Kuchipudi have taken up the profession of dancing. As regards, Bhagvat Mela dance-drama, its entity developed at Melatur, a village in the Tanjore district. The tradition of the Bhagvat Mela ~~and~~ at Melatur is also at least 300 years old, and these dance-dramas are traditionally enacted year after year at that village during the annual Narasimha Jayanti celebrations of the Varadaraja Perumal temple.

In the revival of Bhagvat Mela and other similar dance-dramas enacted in the Vaishnavite temples of other villages of Tanjore district, noteworthy contribution was made by E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi. E. Krishna Iyer an advocate-journalist from Madras and a noted art critic of South India, had been the greatest supporter and promoter of the Bhagvat Mela tradition.

Through his writings, lectures and influence, Krishna Iyer succeeded in focussing the attention of art lovers of Tamil Nad on the existance of the great and noble Bhagvata Mela tradition of Melatur--a tradition of which they had otherwise been unaware and of which the rest of the

country still remains relatively ignorant.

To Rukmini Devi goes the credit of bringing these dance-dramas from the village temples to the urban audience. Some time in 1950, along with E. Krishna Iyer. She visited Soolamangalam to organise the dance-drama festival held there in connection with the annual Utsavam in the temple of Sundaraja Perumal. She was quite anxious to revive this tradition. She made enquiries about the text of the various dance-dramas and after considerable persuasion, could obtain all the desired information on Bhagvata Mela Natak. In 1958, she could persuade Smt. Kalyani Ammal, daughter of Bharatham Natesa Aiyer. She brought with her manuscripts of a number of dance-dramas, including that of Usha Parinayam and Rukmanghada Charithram (Plate VI 5). With the help of Smt. Kalyani Ammal, Rukmini Devi very successfully produced these two dance-dramas in 1959. She not only brought these dance-dramas to the city audience, but she took considerable pains to edit the texts of the various dance-dramas with the help of noted scholars at Kalakshetra, and brought about refinement and sophistication in the content and presentation.

For the first time, a traditional Bhagvat Mela Natak 'Usha Parinaya' was presented by the artistes of Kalakshetra on 11.3.59 at Madras.<sup>40</sup> Rukmanghada Charitram



Rukmini Devi honouring Smt. Kalyani Ammal

followed Usha Parinayam in the same year.

"In these productions, she also sought the assistance of Sri Balu Bhagvatar of Melattur. Sri Balu Bhagvatar had taken part and had taught these dramas in Melattur which is the home of the Bhagvatha Mela. His experience and knowledge were of great assistance in the preparation of the play.

Professor P. Sambamoorthy who wrote an article in the Hindu of 12.3.59 on the production said<sup>41</sup> "The performance of the Telugu Dance Drama, 'Usha Parinayam' by the artists of Kalakshetra, Adyar last night may be considered a land mark in the history of dramatic performances in Madras. For the first time rasikas in this city had the opportunity of witnessing this classical dance-drama written by Melattur Venkatarama Sastri. The beautiful presentation, the appropriate scenic arrangements and costumes, the perfect acting revealing the rasas of the situations, the delightful music of the singers and the accompaniments, all these contributed to the success of the performance. It was a treat to the ear and the eye. No wonder that the audience witnessed the play with rapt attention".

Rukmini Devi has produced three dance-dramas in Bhagvat Mela Nataka style - Usha Parinayam, Rukmangada

Charitram and Dhruva Charitam. Dhruva charitam was produced in 1971 in collaboration with Sri Balu Bhagvathar, when the noted teacher of Bhagvat Mela was deputed by the Sangeet Natak Akademi to work at Kalakshetra in 1971. There he taught Dhruva Charitam to the artistes of Kalakshetra. The text of the play was suitably edited by the scholars, and the play was finally staged under Rukmini Devi's guidance on 24th December 1971 at Kalakshetra.

Rukmini Kalyanam another dance-drama in Bhagvat Mela , produced in 1965, has many Kuchipudi elements. But she gave refinement to it by introducing a number of her own innovations to the theme and presentation. She introduced a fortune teller Gudugadupandyan who predicts Rukminis marriage with Lord Krishna. Through a unique combination of Vachika and Angika Abhinaya, she succeeded in creating a profound impact on the audience.

#### BRIEF SURVEY OF OTHER DANCE-DRAMA PRODUCTIONS

The dance drama productions of Rukmini Devi fall under several categories, and a brief survey of her various productions, fully shows the wealth of new ideas, techniques and literature that she has single handed contributed towards enriching Bharata Natya.

The dance-dramas produced by her, could be classified as under :-

A. Tamil

1. Kutrala Kuravanji (1944)
2. Andala Charitham (1962)
3. Kannapar Kuravanji (1962)
4. Krishnamari Kuravanji (1971).

B. Telugu

1. Usha Parinayam (1959)
2. Rukmangada Charithram (1959)
3. Rukmini Kalyanam (1965)
4. Dhruva Charithram (1971).

C. Sanskrit

I. Kalidasa

1. Kumar Sambhavam (1947)
2. Shakuntalam (1969)

II. Jayadeva

3. Geeta Govinda (1959)

III. Srimad Bhagwatha

4. Matsyavatara-Kurmavatara (1974)

IV. Swati Tirunal

5. Kuchelopkhyanam (1974)

V. Valmiki Ramayana

- |                          |        |
|--------------------------|--------|
| 6. Sita Swayamvaram      | (1955) |
| 7. Rama Vangamanam       | (1960) |
| 8. Paduka Pattabhishekam | (1961) |
| 9. Choodamani Pradanam   | (1968) |
| 10. Sabari Moksham       | (1969) |
| 11. Mahapattabhishekam   | (1970) |

D. Bengali

- |            |        |
|------------|--------|
| 12. Shyama | (1969) |
|------------|--------|

This list does not include the various Kathakali dance-dramas produced by her.

In the preceding pages, the author has already dealt with the various Kuravanji and Bhagvatha Mela dance-dramas produced by Rukmini Devi. An altogether new dance drama based on the life of the Saint- Poetess Andal, was an unique experiment. She wanted for many years to get an authentic life sketch of Andal, and only in 1962, she could produce the dance-drama. Based entirely on Bharata Natya style, of course with her own usual innovations, this production was a challenge for her, because she found that it was 'not easy to produce a dance-drama on the life of one who is child in years but age old in spirit',<sup>42</sup>. In this difficult task, she was assisted by the great composer--

-musician Brahmasri Papanasan Sivan, who gave the music.  
(Plate VI 6).

Rukmini Devi's productions based on classical Sanskrit texts are monumental, and reveal her creative personality most. She has, as listed above, produced dance-dramas based on Kalidasa, Jayadeva, Valmiki etc. She produced Kalidasa's Kumarsambhavam as early as 1947. The essential features of Kalidasa's poem were adopted to stage presentation in a traditional style blending the techniques of Bharata Natya and Kathakali. Rukmini Devi herself took the leading part (Plate VI 7). In the second scene of this production, Kathakali style dominated its Tandava vigour providing an exquisite contrast with the softness of Bharata Natya of the opening scene. It was for the first time that Rukmini Devi successfully blended the two dance styles. Music for this dance drama was provided by the famous composer Tiger Varadacharya. This dance-drama was repeated again at Delhi in 1950 for the first Republic Day celebrations.

Another dance-drama based on Kalidasa's work, was Shakuntalam. Presenting this production in 1969 Rukmini Devi, not only used a combination of Bharata Natya and Kathakali, but she also introduced at appropriate places Vachika ~~and~~ Abhinaya also. Thus it was rather a new experiment, departing from the traditional dance-dramas, and unique in the sense that artistes expressed themselves



PLATE VI. 6

A scene from Andal Charitham - Andal  
with her companions



PLATE VI. 7

Rukmini Devi as meditating Parvati in  
Kumarsambhavam

with appropriate dance gestures and spoken words.

In 1959 Rukmini Devi produced Gita Govindam a dance drama in traditional Bharata Natya style, based on sanskrit lyrics of Jaya Deva. The music was composed by Brahmsri Papanasan Sivan (Plate VI 8).

The first presentation of Matsyavatara and Kurmavatara, based on the stories from Bhagvata, was made at the Kalakshetra Art Festival of 1974. Brahmsri Papanasan Sivan composed music for the many slokas worked out in proper sequence with appropriate Ragas. The dance portion was composed by Rukmini Devi, and it was when she was doing this that she realised the greatness of Papanasan Sivan's efforts. While introducing this presentation at the Art Festival<sup>43</sup> she said, "I never realised till I started to compose the first Avatara (Matsya) years later that I had given him almost an impossible task. However good, music alone cannot create a drama. The type of music for the right bhava of the character, jatis etc. have to enter into the picture, as the stage demands its own medium for the enjoyment of the play by the audience. So this production was a challenge to me to make possible what is impossible and by different methods of suggestive movements, costumes and other ways to create something interesting and inspiring".

Rukmini Devi's exceptional creative talent and



PLATE VI. 8

A scene from Gita-Govinda-Krishna,  
Radha and a Sakhi

genius are ideally reflected in her dance-drama 'Kuchelopakhyanam' based on the famous Sanskrit Kriti of King Swati Tirunal of Kerala. This story is the South Indian version of Sudama Charitra. The remarkable fact about this production is that Rukmini Devi produced the entire dance-drama in her own style on the original music composed by Swati Tirunal.

The Ramayana Series of her dance-drama productions, based on the original Sanskrit text of Valmiki, is perhaps the greatest contribution. Within a span of 15 years, she produced 6 dance-dramas on Ramayana, each, in a chronological sequence, dealing with the successive events of Lord Rama's life and his exploits. All the dance-dramas provided an ideal synthesis of Bharata Natya with some Kathakali gestures and movements.

Sita Swayamvaram in 1955 was the first production of the series. The music was composed by Mysore Vasudevacharya. In the years 1960-61 followed in quick succession the two productions Ramavanagamanam and Padukapattabhishekam. The music was by Mysore Vasudevacharya. The next dance-drama, Chhodamani Pradanam came in 1968. In this, the music was set by S. Rajaram, the grandson of Mysore Vasudevacharya. In 1969 Rukmini Devi produced Sabari Moksham. Music was again by Mysore Vasudevacharya. The last in the series was in 1970,

Mahapattabhishekam (Plate VI 9, 10, 11 and 12).

Rukmini Devi's dance-drama based on Tagore's story Shyama is a radical departure from tradition. In this production she has adequately and artistically blended Bharata Natya with light classical Ravindra Sangeet (Plate VI 13). She presented this in Calcutta in 1969 during the Tagore Centenary celebrations.





A scene from Rama Vanagamana - Jatayu blessing  
Rama, Lakshman and Sita

PLATE VI. 10

A scene from Rama Vanagamanam - Rama  
scolding Surpanakha



PLATE VI. 11

A scene from Choodamani Pradamam - Battle  
between Vali and Sugriva



PLATE VI . 12

A scene from Sabari Moksham - Battle  
between Ravana and Jatayu.

PLATE VI. 13

A scene from Shyama - Shyama with her Sakhis