

CHAPTER - VII

COSTUMES, ORNAMENTS, MUSIC AND NATUVANGAM

COSTUMES:

In the process of the overall refinement of Bharata Natya, the three most important elements of Aharya-abhinaya, also received considerable attention of Rukmini Devi. To her goes the credit of introducing and popularising the various costumes, hair-style and ornaments which are now extensively used by almost all the Bharata-Natya dancers. In doing so, she very critically studied the dance sculptures.

TRADITIONAL COSTUME OF A DEVDASI:

In words of Faubion Bowers⁴⁴ 'The costume worn by Devdasi Bharata Natya dancers until recently consisted of pantaloons on the legs and the sari covering the upper body and draping around the pantaloons.'

a

The traditional dress of a Devdasi has been described in far detail by Ghurye⁴⁵ in his book on Bharata Natya and its costume. He has quoted K. Raghunathji⁴⁶ who wrote a paper in 1884 on 'Bombay Dancing girls' and in this paper he has^{made} certain observations on the dress of South Indian

Devdasis. According to Raghunathji, the Devdasis had their short jackets called coli in the Indoaryan tongues. For the lower part they had drawers or pyjamas and a small Sari which it would appear to us to be bigger than the Gujarati or North Indian Odhani. They sported this wrapper in Sari fashion and it went round the waist at least once. Two or three feet of the material was turned into pleats or gathers which were tucked in at the waist evidently over and into the pyjama waist string. The other end of the Sari going from right side was drawn over the breasts to the left shoulders and over the back and under the right ^rampit, the end being brought forward over the Sari portion already draped and carefully neither too tightly or too loosely, drawn to the left side. There the spread out ornamental end was secured partially in front and partially at the waist. The ornamental end thus appeared in front as a dress improver from the front pleats, deviding them, the lower end of one was drawn behind and tucked at the back so that the Sari, too became a devided garment.

1a and b

The accompanying illustration (Plate VII 122) reproduced from Kay Ambroses⁴⁷ book gives adequate idea of the traditional costume.

COSTUME OF A PRESENT DAY BHARATA NATYA DANCER:

One can easily see that the costume put on by the

PLATE VII. 1

Traditional Costumes worn by Devdasis

Devadasis was so different from what the Bharata Natya dancers put on today. However, very few realise that it was Rukmini Devi who redesigned the traditional costumes, making them more attractive, exquisite and elegant, but at the same time maintaining the authenticity and classical tradition. In accomplishing the task, Rukmini Devi critically studied the ancient sculptures especially those of Chidambaram Temples (Plate VII ^{20.b.c} ~~224~~). The dance sculptures of Chidambaram very clearly show that the 'pyjamas' or 'pantaloon', whatever one may call them, were not worn in old times. The introduction of pyjama was obviously the influence of Muslim invasion. Rukmini Devi thus designed costumes, which had many elements common with those in the dance sculptures. In course of time, the individual dancers have further improved and modified the dress, and today one comes across a rich variety of costumes--but all based on a fundamental design that is due to Rukmini Devi. A modern Bharata Natya costume has been ideally described by Enakshi Bhavnani⁴⁸ in following words --

'The girls wear a rich blouse that is cut short about three inches about the waist, made of gold or of a bright hue, edged at elbow length, sleeves with a wide border of contrasting colour woven with gold. The drapery consists of a fine soft silk saree of any bright shade,

PLATE VII. 2

Dance sculptures from Chidambaram

either plain or designed with gold *motifs* on the material composed of thin lines or squares, or a sprinkling of dots and flowers, and bordered by a wide heavy embossed edging of brocaded gold in floral pattern."

"In traditional style, one end of the nine yards long saree is tucked between the legs and taken to the back and tucked into the waist to allow freedom of movement. The other end, which is very richly woven with gold and designs, is draped in front like an apron, so that as the dancer moves, it opens out like a great petal of gold."

"Today many dancers have the saree stitched into this shape instead of draping it, as it is easier to wear and falls into the required lines without effort."

The accompanying photographs very ideally illustrate the main feature of the costumes designed by Rukmini Devi (Plates VII 3 and 4).

Costumes for Male Bharata Natya Dancers:

As has already been mentioned, traditionally the Bharata Natya (Sadir Natya) was danced exclusively by females. Rukmini Devi included males also, and thus she created a new category of 'Male Bharata Natya Dancers'.

PLATE VII. 3

Rukmini Devi - A Costume designed by herself

PLATE VII. 4

Rukmini Devi - A Costume designed by herself

In doing this, she has again gone back to the Shastras and ancient traditions. Lord Nataraja himself symbolises a male dancer. Old temple sculptures abound in male dancing figures. To Rukmini Devi dance is an expression of happiness and joy which one experiences during his or her sublimes union with Lord. Thus, she enlarged the scope of the Bharata Natya, and taught the art to young boys as well. At Kalakshetra she has trained a number of young boys in this art. As a natural corollary she had to design appropriate costume for the male dancer. For this she again referred to the sculptures of Lord Nataraja as various dancing male figures, and designed her costumes. Male artiste Kalakshetra style puts on a dhoti and decorates his bare body with suitable ornaments (Plate VII 7).

Costumes for Dance Dramas:

Rukmini Devi contribution to the improvisation of dance costumes is most noteworthy in the field of dance-dramas. She produced a number of dance dramas in (1) Bharata Natya (2) Kathakali (3) Combination of Bharata Natya and Kathakali styles (4) Kuravanji and (5) Bhagvata Mela and Kuchipudi traditions. For each, she designed costumes keeping in mind the dance style, the character depicted by the artiste and aesthetics. Thus one finds in her dance-dramas, varieties of newly designed costumes--appropriate

and sober. Those who are associated with Kalakshetra know very well how much pains she has taken in designing costumes. The dresses designed have to be authentic, based on sculptures, tradition and texts, and at the same time such that they fully blend with the personalities of the dancers. It is really a remarkable feat for a single person alone to enrich this aspect of 'aharya abhinaya' so much. To day, after about four decades when dance-dramas have become so common and are staged by most of the present day dancers, few realise that a bold and imaginative step taken by Rukmini Devi 40 years back, provided the starling point of a new tradition in classical dance.

ORNAMENTS AND HAIR STYLE:

So far as the various ornaments used by the female dancers are concerned, Rukmini Devi did not make much change. The traditional jewellery and ornaments usually worn by the Devdasis were refined and redesigned by her to provide variety (Plates VII 3 and 4). But basically the various items of ornaments were kept the same. Of course, she designed special ornaments for the male dancers that were quite different from those used by the females in design, and consisted of waist band, necklace armlets and earstuds (Plate VII. 5).

PLATE VII. 5

Pradeep Barua, male Bharata Natya dancer.
Costume and jewellery as per Rukmini Devi's
designs.

In the matter of hair-do,,with Devadasis and professional dancers, braid was the most common hair style. Perhaps the Sadir Natya tradition prescribed braided pigtail. Rukmini Devi realised that 'Knots' were equally traditional and accepted in ancient days. Saranga deva, while spelling out the personal adornments of a danseuse, has written that the hair should be turned into a loose graceful knot at the back, and it should have in it bright flowers. In the alternative, the hair should be braided into straight long plait and decorated with a string of pearls(Ghurye⁴⁹).

Rukmini Devi herself preferred chignon as against braid. But a scrutiny of the photographs of her students of Kalakshetra, reveals that she preferred braided plaits for younger dancers, while a knot or chignon for artists of maturity. With advancing age, the pigtail does not go well and the most graceful and aesthetically appropriate hairdo comprises knot (Dhamilla) and chignon.

MUSIC:

Classical music has always been an integral part of Bharata Natya (or Sadir Natya) and the various temples where Devadasis performed the dance, had attached with them two groups of performing artists--Periyamelam and Chinnamelam. Periya means bigger and Chinna means small.

The periyamelam comprised the group that provided the music while the Chinnamelam comprised the dance party including the dancer, Nattuvanar and the instrumentalists. By tradition, the musical groups were considered superior as compared to the others, perhaps the reason being that the dancing group had always to depend on the musical group. More over the gradual decline in the respectability of dance as compared to the increasing status of classical music in South India during the last 200 years, was also one of the reasons for an inferior status of a dancer in comparison to the musicians. This process had so profoundly affected the entire set up that the dancers exclusively concentrated towards learning and mastering the dance part and never bothered (or perhaps were not allowed to learn) music side. The dancers thus were always dependent on Nattuvanars and musicians. With the gradual decline of the respectability of the dance by Devadasis, this art form was caught up in a vicious circle, so much so that it alienated many of the music maestros who were instead, replaced by smaller persons anxious to cater to the cheap demands of the patrons. Dasis used to dance on the invitation of Maharajas and rich Cettiyars, and obviously with this secularisation (debasement), the quality and content of the accompanying music also had gone down. Not only the dance became vulgar but the music too was made cheap, less classical and devoid of Bhakti element. Great composers like Gopala

Krishna Bharati and Muthuswami Dixitar gradually became less popular, and in due course their items went into oblivion. Only a few Nattuvanars like Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, knew the various items which were masterpieces of rare talas like Ata Jala and Jhampai. When Rukmini Devi started learning from this great guru, she insisted on learning these old items. Thus she mastered a number of neglected items. The famous Gopala Krishna Bharati's masterpiece composition Natanam Adinar in Ragam Vasanta and Talam Ata, was revived by her. To day, many dancers might be performing this item, but few know the role played by Rukmini Devi in the revival of this item. Many such instances can be quoted. Another noteworthy contribution to the Bharata Natya repertoire, is the variety introduced in Jala. There was a general tendency in professional dancers and Nattuvanars to present items in Adi Tala only the easiest tala to compose and dance. To Rukmini Devi must go the credit of diversefying the Talas in Bharata Natya. One noteworthy contribution is the revival of a rare Kirtanam 'Arivodayor Panindetrum'-⁹ ... in Jhampai Tala and Chakra-vakam Raga. This particular item is not only unique from the raga and tala point of view, but also the Sahitya conveyed Bhakti with variations of Hastas.

Besides reviving many old items, Rukmini Devi composed dances on Tyagaraja's various Kritis. The compositions of this famous saint poet and musician of the

18th Century, were almost boycotted by Devdasis because it is said Thyagaraja was always hostile to dance, perhaps because of its then prevalent degeneration. The credit of introducing Kritis of this Saint poet to Bharata Natya goes to Rukmini Devi. The famous Thyagaraja Kirti 'Ra Ra Sita' was for the first time danced by her, and today most dancers almost invariably perform one or the other composition of Thyagaraja.

Padams of Kshetrappa, also received a special attention at her hands. The Saint poet and musician Kshetrappa ranked in eminence with Purandardasa and Thyagaraja. He composed a number of Padams in very difficult Ragas. Though sung usually in vilambit laya, and being appropriately suited for dance, the less accomplished professional dancers and Nattuvanars avoided them because of the difficult Ragams. Only a very few highly accomplished dancers like Balasaraswati could perform with ease on Padams of Kshetrappa.

Rukmini Devi paid special attention to Kshetrappas lyrics and composed a number of Padams in very difficult Ragas. Rukmini Devis rendering of 'Ninujuda Kalikeno'—Padam in Raga Navroj is a noteworthy, and valuable contribution. She preferred Kshetrappas Padams because they were sung in very rare Ragas and depicted different Nayika very clearly.

Another noteworthy contribution in the field of

dance-music is that Rukmini Devi emphasized the necessity of the dancer learning the music. She not only herself learnt the music but she made it obligatory for all her students to learn and sing the various items on dance. Dasis and Nattuvanars used to pay more attention to the dance compositions only, but Rukmini Devi insisted about the authenticity of the musical compositions also. In accomplishing this task, she was ably and appropriately guided and assisted by the two great Nattuvanars Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai and Muthukumar Pillai. These two teachers were not only eminent Nattuvanars but they were great music masters also.

By the traditional dancers, the music portion of a dance recital was relegated to such a background that most of the Nattuvanars did not bother if the Tirmanams did not begin or end in Tala. Rukmini Devi instead, insisted about the accuracy of Tala, and she saw to it that a proper synchronisation of Tala with Tirmanam is always maintained. It is not intended to say that this was an innovation. Real masters were quite aware of the synchronisation, but the lesser teachers and professional Dasis never bothered to be so accurate.

One more aspect of her contribution to the musical content of Bharata Natya, is that pertaining to the innovation

in composing Jathisvarams, Thillanas, Darus and Varnams. She took help of eminent musicians like Mysore. Veenai Krishnamacharya, Vasudevacharya, Papanasam Sivan and added much depth and variety to the music of dance. Ably advised by the two great Nattuvanars and the above-named musicians, Rukmini Devi embarked up^{on} an ambitious drive of enriching the musical content of her Bharata Natya. She composed Jathisvarams in different ragas. Formerly only 2 or 3 Jathisvarams like Saveri, Vasantha and Kalyani were usually performed by the Dasis and the traditional dancers. Thillanas, which are supposed to have a North Indian origin, were also differently treated. The most important innovation in Thillana was introduction of varieties of Korvais such that the Adavus in each were never repeated. To her goes the credit of reviving another musical item 'Daru' which is similar to Thillana.

The genius of Rukmini Devi is ideally reflected in her Varnam compositions. She got a number of Varnams specially composed in difficult Ragas. An eminent example is the Varnam 'Yehi Manmatha Koti Sundara' -- based on a Sanskrit Kirti on King Vikramaditya. Tiger Varadacharya composed its music and was choreographed by Rukmini Devi specially for the Vikram Sanvatsari celebrations at Ujjain. A special creative feature of Varnams composed by Rukmini Devi is that the set of Thirmanas once included in a

particular Varnam, is never repeated in other Varnams.

A full account of Rukmini Devi's contribution to music is beyond the scope of present work, and it is hoped that some future worker will deal with this aspect in detail itemwise so that a full and complete account of this aspect is also brought to the notice of all.

NATTUVANGAM:

Centuries back Nattuvanars, who conducted the Sadir Natya programmes, were masters in the art of dance and music. By family traditions, they followed the profession under the patronage of Kings. They knew all the intricacies of Karnatak music, could play various instruments and were expert dancers (though they never danced themselves). The main instrument, their prize possession has been a pair of cymbals--one of bronze and the other of steel. By striking the bronze disc against the steel one, these experts --create intricate rhythmic sound following which the dancers perform. This small pair of Talam powerfully dominates and guides the dance performance. These cymbals--Nattuvatalam, are the most precious possession of Nattuvanars, a very sacred instrument never to be allowed to be handled by the dancers.

The art of Nattuvangam was, thus always kept a secret, and confined to the Nattuvanars only. They never

divulged or taught the art to their dance pupils. Without Nattuvanars, it was impossible for the dancers to perform, and thus these Nattuvanars became indispensable to the dancers. Originally of course, the Nattuvanars were the 'Pandits' who knew the art of dance well and they, with all the dignity and traditional purity, conducted the programme. They rivalled with the skill of the dancers and it was quite often a competition between the proficiencies of the dancer and the Nattuvanar, and the Nattuvanar always took great pride in the excellence of his pupil. But in due course, with degeneration of the dancers, Nattuvanars became despotic and unscrupulous. They exploited the dancers by putting unreasonable demands and conditions for teaching and accepting the assignment of Nattuvangam.

When Rukmini Devi started learning dance, she realised how much hold these Nattuvanars had over the dancer. She got convinced that unless the dancers, particularly those who do not belong to the professional class, are able to be independent of the traditional Nattuvanars, the art of Bharata Natya will not regain its' original glory, by coming out ^{of} its' degeneration. The strong hold of a Nattuvanar had to be somehow shaken off. In her own dance career, she had several bitter experiences. It is said that once she had the great musician Papanasam Sivan to sing for her

performance and Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai was the Nattuvanar. Through an unintentional printing mistake the name of the Nattuvanar was printed in smaller letters than that of Papanasa in Sivan. Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai was so furious that he refused to conduct Nattuvangam at the last minute. Such experiences convinced Rukmini Devi of the need of learning Nattuvangam also, and she became determined to master this art also. She managed to acquire a pair of Talams and successfully mastered the secret art of Nattuvangam.

Very few persons know that Rukmini Devi was the first dancer and that too from a non-professional family background, who mastered this art of Nattuvangam. She can be ranked as the first ever lady Nattuvanar, handling the Nattuvatala as deftly as any professional Nattuvanar, and construct and recite most complicated Tirmanams.

Not only she herself mastered this art, but she introduced the art of Nattuvangam in the curriculum and teaching programme of Kalakshetra. In early days, all her students were imparted training in Nattuvangam, but now, having realised that some of her lesser proficient pupils were misusing the art, she has restricted the training of Nattuvangam to a limited number of a few deserving pupils

only.

Rukmini Devi has no doubt, created a new category of Nattuvanars who are not only proficient in the art of Nattuvangam but are equally good dancers and composers, and perhaps this is one of her greatest contributions to Bharata-Natyam.

STAGE ARRANGEMENTS AND CHOREOGRAPHY:

It can be said that Rukmini Devi modernised the ancient classical dance---Bharata Natyam, without sacrificing any of its traditional features and purity. It is common knowledge that whether it was a solo Sadir Attam or dance-drama like Kuravanji, Kuchipudi or Bhagvata Mela, it was presented in a very crude manner. Apart from the intricacies of music and dance, rest of the show was quite crude and much improvisation in the presentation was needed to make it acceptable to the modern society and to project it properly at international level.

This aspect also received Rukmini Devi's attention and she practically transformed the art into a most modern yet traditional dance form of India. Having travelled widely all over the world and witnessed the best stage performances in various countries, she was fully equipped

with ideas ~~with~~ and know-how in matters of stage arrangement and choreography. This task of hers was quite difficult. On one hand, she had to develop and emphasise the devotional and divine aspects, at the cost of prevalent sensuality and vulgarity, the latter being the main attractions with the patrons in those days, and on the other hand make the dance-recitals more brilliant yet authentic.

One has to go back to 4-5 decades to appreciate her pioneering effort in this direction.

To day, dance recitals and dance-drama presented by the various noted artistes are of superb quality so far as the art of production and stage arrangements are concerned, the path was shown by Rukmini Devi. Here the mention may be made of the various noted dancers like Uday Shanker and Ramgopal who were almost the contemporaries of Rukmini Devi. They also were pioneers in the effort of popularising and modernising the Indian dance, and their contribution is also quite noteworthy. But, their work has now to be analysed in the perspective of the last 3-4 decades, and when it is done, one finds that what Rukmini Devi did has sustained and become a powerful art tradition, while the others have practically gone into oblivion. Perhaps Rukmini Devi's strong point was her

authenticity and strict adherence to the ancient traditions and values of dance. The author may venture to state that the only dance exponent to follow the footsteps of Rukmini Devi is Mrinalini Sarabhai in this respect.

It is not possible here to enumerate all the points to describe the improvisations made by Rukmini Devi in respect of the stage arrangement and choreography. As it is well known, she always insists on perfection in matters of proper light and mike arrangements. Unless it is essential, she does not encourage too much use of coloured light. Similarly, the stage has to be adequately decorated but without departing from aesthetic sense and simplicity. Costumes too have to be appropriate and elegant yet simple. Her entire stage set up is so designed and arranged that the dancer and her act gets prominence and other paraphernalia around the artiste does not distract and subdue the dance part.

An important modification made by her in the arrangement of stage, pertains to the Nattuvanar's position. Previously, the Nattuvanar and his supporting vocalists and instrumentalists used to stand behind the dancer at a distance of 5 to 6 feet, and during various Nritta or Nritya items, they moved forwards and backwards along with

the dancer. This arrangement was highly unsatisfactory and always distracted the attention of the audience. The artiste too was always uncomfortable. Rukmini Devi placed the musicians on one side of the stage and this arrangement was found to be convenient to all--the Nattuvanars, dancer as well as the audience.

Another important point which needs mentioning is the strict stage discipline in her programme. She has insisted on very strict discipline while dancing and no casual attitudes or movements are permitted by her. This is a very special feature of the Kalakshetra style. Also she is very particular about the entry and exit of the artistes.

Her choreography in respect of Group items is specially praiseworthy. With the help of 3 to 8 or even more dancers, she has composed group dances in infinite varieties. The artistes in a particular dance are seen to group and regroup beautifully in various symmetries. They do this with great poise and grace, and yet do not distract the audience from the main theme. The group movements are so designed that they very appropriately convey the role of the characters and mood of the story. Interspersed with appropriate Tirmanams, the group dance compositions of Rukmini Devi are unique and of which there are no parallels.

In her group items, the artistes appear to be like a Kaledioscope-changing in quick succession and making exquisite patterns on the stage.

MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS:

A few lines about her contribution towards the use of musical instruments are also most appropriate here. In the course of last two Centuries, gradually some of the western instruments had become a part of the dance art orchestra. Clarionette, Violin and harmonium were quite common. Of course they are commonly used to day also, but they are not traditional and according to Rukmini Devi not very appropriate to the needs of Bharata Natyam. Not that she tabooed them, but she introduced and brought back the use of flute, mukhveena and morchung.

Flute (Kuzhal) is the traditional Indian pipe instrument, where all the graces and shades of Indian (Karnatak) music can be performed. It matches and harmonises with the human voice. 'The human voice and flute are alike in some respects. Both are monophonous instruments and have a compass of $2\frac{1}{2}$ octaves corresponding to the Tristhayi Sariram⁵⁰. The appropriate use of a flute in various items of Nritta and abhinaya, especially those pertaining to Lord Krishna has been found to considerably enhance the effect of dance.

Mukhaveena is another instrument rehabilitated by Rukmini Devi. It is a wind instrument (not any kind of Veena)- a miniature Nagasvaram having pleasing and soft tone. It is usually played during certain night services in temples. Formerly, it was used in Chinna-melam, but was gradually replaced by the clarinet. Rukmini Devi revived its use, especially in Kuravanji Natakam. Unfortunately there are very few musicians who can play Mukhveena. With great difficulty she found out one Shree Reddy who could play this instrument.

An instrument which got a favourable attention from Rukmini Devi is Morchung. It is a simple instrument comprising an elastic iron strip (tongue) fixed across the middle of a circular iron ring, the strip projecting a little beyond the ring at one end. The instrument is held by the left hand and the fork portion is held in the mouth. The other end of the strip is plucked by the forefinger of the right hand. The cavity of the mouth acts as a resonator. A skilled performer can play the jati combinations with accuracy. When played along with Mridangam, the combined effect is very pleasing and Rukmini Devi has exclusively used the instrument especially to bring out effectively the beauty of the Jatis.

For ^hrythmic accompaniment, Rukmini Devi has restricted

Mridangam for Bharata Natya recitals, but in her dance-dramas, extensive use of Maddala, Chenda, Dholak has also been made at appropriate places.