

CHAPTER - VIIIR E S U M ELOOKING BACK

Bharata Natya, a few decades back, was known by various other names, such as Sadir Natya, Sadir Attam ~~or~~ Dasi Attam. For several Centuries, this art of dancing was in the hands of Dasis. Devdasis danced in the temples, Rajadasis were the court dancers attached to the royal durbars, while the Alankara dasis gave dance recitals for the pleasure of rich citizens on social occasions. It is ^{to} the credit of Dasis that for many centuries, they preserved the technique and the spirit of the ancient Indian dance. In course of time, the Sadir unfortunately degenerated. With the advent of the British rule and the ~~cessation~~ of royal patronage, the Dasis were compelled ^{to} seek remuneration for whatever source they could avail of, and in return they had to please ~~their~~ benefactors. Immoral women, calling themselves 'Dasis' exploited this dance. The result was that at the turn of the present century, the orthodox Hindu society in South India had turned against ~~the~~ Dasis and ~~their~~ art. This noble art had so much fallen down that even to witness the Sadir dance by respectable people, especially by women was almost totally forbidden. It was during such a period of gloom and darkness, that two

great social reformers and art lovers, emerged on the cultural scene of Tamilnad. One was E. Krishna Iyer and the other was Rukmini Devi. During the third and fourth decade of this century, there appeared to be an upsurge throughout South India towards the revival and popularisation of the various forms of this ancient dance, renamed as Bharata Natya. Both E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi were the pioneers, but the approach of the two was quite different. While E. Krishna Iyer worked hard to rehabilitate Bharata Natya mainly through Devdasis and professional dancers, Rukmini Devi, on the other hand, strived to bring back the respectability of this art by crusading against the sensuality and vulgarity that had become an essential part of this art. Her accent was on the Bhakti element, with emphasis on the spiritual and devotional aspects. The Shringara was pushed to background.

Nearabout 1932, she approached Shri Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, the noted Nattuvanar of his time, and with great difficulty could persuade the great master to teach her the dance of Devdasis. In December, 1935 at the age of 30 years, she gave her first dance recital. Her dance created a revolution in the cultural and social life of South India. Soon after, Kalakshetra was born. This institution has grown under her inspiring leadership and day to day guidance, into an unique and internationally reputed centre

of fine arts. It is at Kalakshetra that Rukmini Devi has experimented in dance and carried on innovations.

A dancer trained at Kalakshetra can be easily marked out by a distinct stamp of a unique style and training. Rukmini Devi having learnt the art under noted teachers and being assisted in her work by great music masters and poets, she has been able to evolve a style of her own. She has so improvised this dance style that it radiates astuteness and sublimity. Though, it is rather difficult to ^{precisely} ~~precisely~~ define and describe the Kalakshetra style of Bharata Natya; but in a general way, it can be said to be typically characterised by (i) a crispness and precision of movements, (ii) very rigorous training and (iii) complete elimination of erotic and sensual elements.

Considering both the Nritta and Nritya aspects, the Kalakshetra style of Rukmini Devi, shows following characteristics:

1. An erect posture, with no undue bending of the body at any angle.
2. Shoulders kept straight.
3. All positions of hands and feet in balanced straight lines.

4. No breaking or bending of elbows and wrists.
5. No hip movements.
6. All angles made by hand and feet so precisely laid down that there will not be a slightest variation between two or more Kalakshetra artists.

She systematised the teaching of adavus by fixing a sequence. She also introduced quite a few new Adavus. She enriched the Nritha aspect by composing a large number of new Thirumanams, Jathiswarams and Thillanas.

Her Nritya innovations can be grouped as under:-

- (1) Borrowing of appropriate gestures from Kathakali
- (2) Creating new gestures.

As such, the Bharata Natya has been always a dance of diversity; a vehicle of expressing human devotion to the Almighty. With its degeneration, the dancers chose to perform items in such manner which would entertain their patrons. The entire concept of the Lord and the Devotee was depicted as that of Nayaka and Nayika, and accordingly the gestures for the words were made. Rukmini Devi brought back the original devotional meaning by appropriate gestures.

Apart from the distinctive modification brought about in the technique and content of the traditional Bharata Natya repertoire, her another significant contribution pertains to performing of this dance in groups. Traditionally, the Sadir Attam has been a Solo dance. Rukmini Devi introduced a change in the tradition, and presented more than one dancers at a time, performing various items Alaripus, Jathiswaram, and Thillanas in twos and threes and even in larger groups. By this innovation, she made the dance more picturesque and attractive. In Nritya too, she ~~has~~ introduced group dancing. Either all dancers depict the same character or situation in harmony or they depict differently different characters, simulating a dialogue through dance gestures.

Her biggest contribution comprises the Dance-Dramas. She ~~has~~ included in Bharata Natya, all forms of dances and dance dramas which are in accordance with the Natya Shastra. She enlarged the narrow scope of Bharata Natya to a much broader base, and doing this, she experimented with the technique by producing dance dramas in Bharata Natya. A scientific and ^{critical} ~~artical~~ analysis of her dance dramas, reveals following special features:-

1. Combination of the various Natya elements.
2. Blending of Bharata Natya and Kathakali styles.

3. Sophisticated presentation of dance dramas like Kuravanji, Kuchipudi and Bhagvat Mela.
4. Scope for all the four types of abhinaya.
5. Compositions based on Sanskrit classics.
6. Participation of both male and female dancers playing respective roles.

She has produced a large number of dance dramas, of which 20 are very famous.

In the process of overall refinement of Bharata Natya, the Aharya abhinaya has also received considerable attention of Rukmini Devi. To her goes the credit of introducing and popularising the various costumes, hair styles and ornaments which are now extensively used by almost all Bharata Natya dancers today. As Rukmini Devi created a new category of male Bharata Natya dancers, she specially designed costumes and jewelleryes for them. For this, she referred to the sculptures of Nataraja and other male dancing figures.

Rukmini Devi has also significantly enriched the music content of the dance. The traditional dancers had relegated good music to the background. Not only she insisted on the correctness of tala and proper synchro-

nisation of dance and music, but she revived many old items of the great composers like Gopal Krishna Bharati and Muthu Swami Dixitar. She for the first time composed dances on Thyagaraja's devotional Kritis. The Padams of Kshetrappa also received special attention from her. Another noteworthy contribution in the field of dance music is that she emphasized the necessity of the dancer learning the music.

Very few persons know that Rukmini Devi was the first dancer and that too from a non-professional family background, who mastered the art of Nattuvangam. Not only she herself learnt this art, but she also taught this art of conducting dance programme to several of her deserving students. She has thus created a new generation of non-professional Nattuvanars.

To day, dance recitals and dance dramas have become quite popular and frequent. Many of them are of superb quality. The path was shown by Rukmini Devi. There were many contemporary dancers who were pioneers in popularising and modernising Indian dance. But their work when analysed in the perspective of the last 4 decades, amply reveals that what Rukmini Devi did, has sustained and become a powerful art tradition, while

others have gone into oblivion. Rukmini Devi's strong point has been that she has always strictly adhered to the ancient traditions and ^{values} ~~value~~ of dance.

A PEEP IN FUTURE

Rukmini Devi is still living and she is still actively working at Kalakshetra. The dynamic art tradition, based on the ancient values, started by her, is growing stronger and stronger. Bharata Natya today is indeed at the zenith of its glory.

One can certainly ask a question. What will be Bharata Natya when Rukmini Devi retires or is no more? The answer to this question has been provided by the living traditions established at Kalakshetra and also the rich heritage that she will leave behind at Kalakshetra. She has evolved a philosophy of dance that has been accepted by and large by the enlightened young artists of India. All over, there is an awareness to preserve and propagate the noblest and best of our Indian culture.

Rukmini Devi shall leave behind a living and dynamic art tradition. Bharata Natya has come to stay. Dance-dramas of great excellence are being presented by many dance exponents. The public is now gradually

becoming appreciative of good and pure dance.

In the archives of Kalakshetra, are documented and stored all the technical details pertaining to the dance and music contents of all the experiments of Rukmini Devi for the future reference and guidance. The institution has produced a large number of trained and dedicated experts who have spread all over India, and whose students in *turn* are propogating the dance traditions of Rukmini Devi.

A world traveller or to-day, ^{whether} ~~whitha~~ hailing from the West or East, comes to India to see the spiritual greatness of our country, even in dance and music. Gone are the days, when 'White' Connoiss^eures tried to interpret Indian dance tradition as if it was just another facet of *mediaval* Indian life that produced maharajas and snake ^{charm^{ers}} ~~charmas~~. It is no surprise that the various authors from the ~~West~~ who wrote books on Indian dance in the past never really understood the real spiritual greatness of this ancient art, and failed to appreciate the pioneering mission on which Rukmini Devi had embarked upon 40 years ago. It is only to-day, when one looks back, one realises the greatness of Rukmini Devi.