

CHAPTER - I

I N T R O D U C T I O N

GENERAL

India with its rich and varied cultural heritage has to offer very scientifically evolved dance styles, for which there are hardly any parallels anywhere in the world. What one commonly refers to as 'classical Indian dance' is a thoroughly perfected and codified technique of dance, worked out by ancient sages who were equally well-versed in the exquisite art. In fact, the Natya Shastra of Bharata-Muni, which is supposed to date back as far as 4000 years or more, contains an eloquent and most scientific exposition and elaboration of the various elements of dance, music and dramatics, and the work even to-day stands as one of the most monumental treatises on these fine arts.

India, being a country of varied people and cultures, in its different parts, the art of dancing evolved differently in the course of its long history, the various styles of dancing deriving basically their classical elements from Bharata's Natya Shastra, but diversifying and blossoming into quite independent dance styles. Each of such dance styles, though basically classical, evolved into quite distinct dance forms, having been influenced by the history and culture of the region concerned. In the vastness of Indian

subcontinent, many styles thus developed, and of these, Bharata Natya, Kathakali^{Kathak} and Manipuri are considered as the four main schools of classical dancing. No doubt each has got its own special and attractive features, but of these, the Bharata Natya is the oldest and best developed.

Today Bharata Natya is thought to be the dance style of South India. For the last so many centuries, the home of this dance form has been the area covered by the existing States of Tamilnad, Andhra and Karnataka, and mostly confined to the Hindu temples.

According to E. Krishna Iyer¹ 'Till seven hundred years ago, it was the only highly developed dance art in vogue throughout India from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.'

'The South of India is the land of ancient Hindu traditions and culture, for it was far away from the various conquests and invasions which took place in the North until the time of the British domination, and so passed through a more peaceful evolution and clung more closely to the old ways. Its culture developed without the impact of alien civilizations and reached a wonderful harmony of philosophical thought and practice.'²

Obviously the Muslim invasions of North India,

were primarily responsible for the original classical dance of India to get confined to the Southern part of the country, where its originality and traditions were preserved. It is rather gratifying that the ancient and original dance traditions of India could thus survive and further develop with purity, by a sustained patronage from successive generations of Kings and nobles in South India and specially in Tamilnad.

It is a common knowledge that Bharata-Natya, a few decades back was known by other names such as Sadir Natya, Sadir Attam or Dasi Attam. The more common, viz. the Dasi Attam meant 'the dance of Devdasi' and the name came into vogue because of the fact that this art of classical dance was exclusively preserved by the Devdasis of the South. For several centuries the art was in the hands of Devdasis and it is to their credit, that they preserved the technique and the spirit of the ancient Indian dance. Until about forty years ago, in South India, recitals given by Devdasi dancers were called Sadir, and this Sadir was performed on all auspicious occasions in temples, palaces and houses of rich people. In course of time, the Sadir unfortunately degenerated by developing sensual characteristics which almost brought about the extinction of the art. The Devdasi system which had been responsible for many past centuries in preserving this classical art, also gradually deteriorated. Kay Ambrose has ideally

described in nutshell the cause of this downfall. She writes³ "Despite the great esteem in which this elegant, refined and highly religious dance was held, it is not hard to understand how it gradually tended towards degradation, propounding as it did such a subject as Divine love, and danced by such dancers. Eventually, rich Indian noblemen started to employ these devadasis (literally 'Servants of god' also called bayaderes) in their palaces. With their innate love of the rare and the beautiful, the princes soon saw that these wonderfully-trained and lovely girls would provide a surpassingly piquant entertainment in their courts. They gave large sums to the girls and their teachers, with the result that the dances soon came to be addressed, not to a deity, but to the maharajah or prince in question; with the dance-teachers all competing with one another as to who could produce the most erotic dances and the most seductive pupils as bait for untold wealth and patronage."

This brought about the downfall and gradually the respectable amongst the society started shunning the art. This noble art had so much fallen down that even to witness a dance show by respectable people--especially by women was almost totally forbidden. These factors brought about the downfall.

It was only a few decades back, that some bold

reformists and art minded enthusiasts like E. Krishna Iyer, V. Raghavan and Rukmini Devi realised the inherent greatness and spiritual depth of this dance form, and made pioneering efforts for its rehabilitation and revival. The dance form got its rightful name 'Bharata Natya.'

For the revival of this dance form, E. Krishna Iyer carried on a relentless battle during the twenties and thirties of the Century, and gradually the Bharata Natya recitals started becoming popular and respectable. However, this dance still remained in the hands of Devdasis till as late as 1937, when 'two cultured artists of respectable families, Kalanidhi a young girl of Mylapore, and Rukmini Devi of Adyar came out boldly, after appreciable training in Bharata-Natya and opened a new chapter in the history of the renaissance!'⁴

In the years to follow, many other girls from middle class families also came up, and to-day Bharata Natya enjoys a very high social status. In a way, at the moment, this ancient dance form of India is at the Zenith of its glory being performed and appreciated not only in all parts of India but also in foreign lands.

So much is being written and spoken these days on Bharata Natya. Accomplished dancers put up picturesque programmes and win laurels. But few really know how great the contribution of Rukmini Devi has been in the revival

of Bharata-Natya.

In the renaissance Rukmini Devi not only played a significant role by boldly presenting dance recitals herself, but she took upon herself the most arduous task of going deep into the various aspects of the ancient art, carry on research and bring out the richness and beauty of the dance form in its most sacred and pure form. Her contribution in the field of the revival of Bharata Natya is really great and it is no exaggeration to state that but for her, this classical dance form could not have been what it is today.

During the third and fourth decade of this century, there appeared to be an upsurge throughout South India towards the revival and popularisation of Bharata Natya and its various forms. Both E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi, were the pioneers, each having contributed greatly to the cause of the dance. But it is so evident that the approach of the two was quite different. E. Krishna Iyer strived hard to rehabilitate Bharata Natya mainly through the Devdasis and professional dancers. He delved deep into the then prevailing techniques and discovered the identity between Sadir Natya and Bhagvata Mela. He danced himself dressed as a woman. According to Kay Ambrose⁵ 'he danced anywhere where enough people could be assembled to do any good : in films, on concert platforms, at political meetings. And slowly and surely, all he said, the grace

and beauty of his dance, began to leave its mark. So he moved on to his next step, and started to assemble all the remaining traditional Bharata Natya dancers he could find or unearth, presenting them wherever possible with a preface of his own explanation.⁴ No doubt, his contribution has been great, but in contrast, Rukmini Devi strived to bring back the respectability of this art by crusading against the sensuality and vulgarity that was a part of the dance form then. Her accent was on the Bhakti element and all her energies and activities were directed against the then prevalent undesirable practices of Devdasis and their teachers and patrons. Her efforts towards emphasizing the spiritual and devotional aspect naturally invited considerable wrath of the supporters and admirers of the professional dancers. The prejudice was so great that they would not even acknowledge the proficiency of Rukmini Devi as a dancer. It is a real pity that as late as 1950, Kay Ambrose⁵ in her over-enthusiasm for the work of E. Krishna Iyer wrote "At length a society woman in her late thirties pronounced herself ready to learn Bharata Natya, and Iyer took her to his teachers, concealing his amusement when he recognised in her an enthusiastic member of the bombastic Anti-Nautch campaign. She never really mastered the art, and characteristically never gave Iyer the credit due to him, taking for herself the prestige of "discovering" Bharata Natya,

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which she subsequently got all muddled up with other religious practices.' ' Indeed this was a jaundiced view and the subsequent 25 years that have followed, have very clearly shown to one and all about the proficiency and greatness of the lone crusader who not only revived Bharata Natya but also refined it and brought back to it, the long lost spiritual glory. To propagate her own ideals, she established a cultural centre - Kalakshetra in Madras where for the last several decades, students from all parts of the country and abroad, come for learning dance and other various fine arts.

For more than 40 years, Rukmini Devi has done pioneering service for the cause of Bharata Natya and it is now the most appropriate time to evaluate her contribution, to the cause of Indian dance.

The present work by the author is a modest attempt in this direction, and the thesis incorporates a brief but critical account of the work done by Rukmini Devi in the field of dance.

SCOPE OF THE PRESENT STUDY

The author took up the study at the instance of Smt. Anjali S. Merh Head of the Department of Dance, M. S.

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University of Baroda. It is under her active guidance and supervision that this thesis has been prepared. Smt. Merh herself is an accomplished dancer and teacher of Bharata Natya and she happens to belong to the earliest batch of students that Rukmini Devi prepared at Kalakshetra, ~~about~~ more than 30 years ago. Smt. Merh has imbibed in herself and her teaching all the salient features and characteristics of the dance style of Rukmini Devi, which is most appropriately known as the 'Kalakshetra style of Bharata Natya.

The author has presented in forthcoming pages of this thesis an account of her research, based mainly on a variety of sources.

The author could collect considerable information from Smt. Merh herself. In a subject matter like the present one, there is always very little written and published material available, and as such most of the relevant and important data had to be obtained by personal talks and discussions from a representative cross section of dancers, dance teachers and dance critics.

The author personally visited Kalakshetra and collected all available information from the staff and students there. She discussed many points with Rukmini Devi herself. She also got in touch with other dancers,

dance teachers and dance critics and ascertained their views on the subject matter.

A critical compilation of all available information, incorporated in this thesis, reveals ideally the greatness of Rukmini Devi's personality and her contribution to Bharata Natya.