

## CHAPTER - IV

### PERSONALITY OF RUKMINI DEVI

#### FAMILY BACKGROUND

Rukmini Devi is one of the outstanding personalities of modern India and in her there is an unique combination of diverse capabilities and accomplishments. Her personality has many facets. Not only she is a renowned exponent of Bharata Natya, but she is a noted Theosophist, social reformer, humanitarian and educationist.

She hails from a noted Iyer family--of Tanjavur, and was born on February 29, 1904 at Madurai. Her father Sri Nilkantha Shastri was an engineer by profession. But he was also a well known Theosophist and a Sanskrit scholar. Her mother Smt. Seshammal (who is still living) was in her time, an accomplished scholar of Karnataka music. Thus, Rukmini Devi was born with a rich heritage of scholarship and fine art.

As both her parents were ardent Theosophists, Rukmini Devi spent most of her childhood under the influence of and in close association with noted leaders of Theosophical movement like Dr. C. W. Leadbeater and Dr. Annie Besant. Though she never received formal school and college education



as was the practice in those days, her enlightened parents gave her a full and complete education at home, and thus Rukmini Devi grew up into a young lady accomplished in English, Sanskrit, Indian History, Culture and Philosophy. Also she had mastered Karnatak music. Initially she started her career as a Theosophist and a Social reformer, and it was during these activities that she came in close contact with Dr. G. S. Arundale, the noted Theosophist and educationist of those days with whom she married at the age of sixteen years. Her marriage to Dr. Arundale was perhaps the turning point in Rukmini Devi's life, and since that date she has embarked upon a momentous life journey that has enriched India's cultural, social and educational scene for almost three-fourth of the 20th century. Perhaps for many more decades to come Rukmini Devi will continue to contribute in the various fields of her activities.

The orthodox Brahmin society of South India, did not approve of Rukmini Devi's marriage to a non-Hindu European like Dr. Arundale and as a result, she had to face considerable opposition from her relatives and friends. Braving all the boycott from her society, she continued her social activities under the able guidance of her illustrious husband.

It was in 1925, that Rukmini Devi started her career

as a Theosophist missionary and took upon herself the assignment of extensive travelling in India and abroad, lecturing to varied audiences on different aspects of Indian art, education, philosophy, religion and womenhood.

#### BEGINNING OF HER DANCE CAREER

Perhaps 1926 was the year that provided a major turning point in her life. In this year, during her trip to Australia, she met the famous Ballerina Anna Pavlova and a keen desire for learning dance was kindled in her. She received ballet tutitions from Anna Pavlova's Soloist Cleo Nardi. As her biographic records point out, in a way Anna was also responsible for directing and inspiring Rukmini Devi to take to Indian Dance.

In 1932 she witnessed a dance performance of two disciples of the famous Nattuvanar and dance teacher Sri. Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, and finally resolved to take to dance seriously. To her, the dance appeared to be a most effective vehicle of bringing about an awareness in Indians about their great cultural heritage, and to achieve this she had to take out the dance out of its existing degradation.

It thus became her main mission in life to salvage the noble art, take it out of a degraded environment and

place it on a socially high and noble pedestal. She believed in the divinity of the art of Indian dancing and took upon herself the difficult task of its revival and uplift. It was no doubt a herculian task and in her efforts she had to face opposition from the society which disapproved of ladies from respectable families to take to Bharata Natya.

She approached Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. In the beginning the famous dance teacher was not prepared to teach Rukmini Devi. He thought that her interest was merely dilettante and that she would, at that age, hardly submit to the rigorous discipline of the dance training. Finally he was persuaded to accept her, and when he started teaching her, he was amazed by her sincerity and interest. The dance came naturally to her and very soon she convinced her teacher of her unfending greatness. (Plate IV 1)

In December 1935, at the age of 30 years, Rukmini Devi gave her first dance recital before the delegates of the International Convention of Theosophists at Adyar in Madras. This dance recital was historic. It was the first time that a lady of 'good birth' had ever learnt and presented this dance. This event created such a stir and revolution in the minds of a large number of people, that it paved the way for future popularity of the dance which

PLATE IV. 1

Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai

the dance reformists like E. Krishna Iyer, V. Raghavan and Rukmini Devi named as Bharata Natya. In the years to follow, she gave a number of performances, and her dance created a revolution in the public mind. (Plate IV 2)

### 'KALAKSHETRA'

Immediately after her first performance at Adyar in 1935, Kalakshetra was born. With the help of many eminent men including Dr. James H. Cousins, Sri. K. Chandrashekharan, Sri. P. V. Rajamanna, Sri. Narayan Menon and Dr. Radhakrishnan, Rukmini Devi established in 1936 an Academy of Dance at Adyar. In 1938 Rukmini Devi felt that the name of the organisation should be changed and that it should have an Indian name. After considerable deliberations, the name Kalakshetra suggested by the noted sanskrit scholar Pandit Subramania Sastri, was enthusiastically accepted by all. Since then this institution has grown and developed into an unique and internationally reputed centre of fine art learning. Kalakshetra today is a citadel of learning where various Indian fine arts are taught in a typically Ashrama atmosphere. This institution has flowered into a great centre where students from all parts of the world come and learn music, dance and many other crafts. In the course of last 40 years, Kalakshetra under the active and constant stewardship of Rukmini Devi has steadily grown in its stature and today it is noted



PLATE IV. 2

Rukmini Devi depicting Shiva

centre of Bharata Natya and many other fine arts.

Kalakshetra has thus gained international repute maintaining its pride of place as a centre of Indian Art with a total adherence to Indian traditions. Since its inception it has endeavoured to maintain the purity and beauty of the spirit embodied in the great traditions of India combined with the highest standards of technique and learning. At the beginning the classes were held under the trees and in thatched huts; in a couple of years the number of students had increased and the art school expanded from a single thatched classroom to a few hutments. The public had already assessed Rukmini Devi as a connoisseur of art without a blemish. Her dance performances, usually arranged in connection with the Art-Evenings of the Theosophical Society's Conventions in Adyar, attracted large audiences and when Kalakshetra was started by her, parents were happy to entrust their children to its care and training for they knew that even if the training was hard and exacting, the results would be perfectly satisfying to the pupil, the teacher, the parent and the audience. In a short time, day scholars and boarders streamed into the classrooms; and soon Kalakshetra, growing step by step, slowly but steadily, had to think of its own buildings.

The Central Government and the Government of Madras sanctioned funds in the shape of recurring grants, matching



grants and scholarships; donations were collected from philanthropists and well wishers; and funds were raised by staging the dance-dramas of Kalakshetra produced and directed by Rukmini Devi. All this demanded untiring effort and unflinching support, especially during the infancy of the institution when it had to struggle for its mere existence.

Many difficulties had to be surmounted before the institution could be firmly established. Students had to be placed in charge of teachers of calibre since the result of the knowledge imparted to them had to be traditional and pure and most of all, Indian. To teach Bharata Natya, the services of good nattuvanars had to be requisitioned. Rukmini Devi's own Guru, Sri Meenakshisundaram Pillai, was kind enough to give her a lot of guidance. Teachers who could teach the dance in its pure form had to be trained at Kalakshetra itself. Its coffers had often to be drained to meet the demands of the great artists who had gathered round Rukmini Devi but Kalakshetra was determined to face and overcome these difficulties.

Besides diploma courses in Bharata Natya, Kathakali, Carnatic Music (vocal and instrumental), in Painting and Crafts, and Theatre Arts, Kalakshetra also provides general education of a high standard, and students may choose to study an additional language like Tamil, Telugu or Hindi as

a special subject. Since a majority of students reside on the campus, efforts are made to give them a home-like atmosphere as far as possible. The students, Indian and foreign, are taught to lead simple lives and to learn to understand the full and true meaning of art in its twin aspects of inspiration and expression. As far as possible the atmosphere of a gurukula is maintained. Emphasis is laid on the promotion of the religious spirit on a non-sectarian basis, simplicity of living, culture and good citizenship.

For many years, Kalakshetra has been growing more and more into an International Centre, and visitors as well as students are coming to this Centre for the study of Indian culture, Dance, Music, Sanskrit and other subjects.

It is at Kalakshetra that Rukmini Devi has experimented in dance and carried on innovations. But for the Kalakshetra she could not have been able to contribute to Bharata Natya what she has done. She beautified this ancient dance form so much that all over India it became popular and known. She has been untiringly working for the last four decades and has presented her students all over India and abroad. Even at the advanced age Rukmini Devi tours extensively and presents before people her new experiments.

### SOCIAL REFORMER AND EDUCATIONIST

In subsequent years, Rukmini Devi gradually diversified her activities and in addition to looking after Kalakshetra and lecturing in Theosophy, she gradually switched over to various social work activities. Apart from her keen interest in the child welfare and education she started a vigorous campaign against cruelty to animals. She also propagated ~~the~~ vegetarianism and set up a 'Vegetarian League'. She is the founder of the Society for 'Prevention of Cruelty to Animals' in India.

On August 12, 1945 Rukmini Devi suffered her greatest loss. Dr. G. S. Arundale, passed away after a brief illness. She not only lost her husband, but to her, a towering support was removed.

In 1952 the President of India Dr. S. Radhakrishnan nominated her to Rajyasabha. Her nomination was due to her distinction as an artiste and social worker, and as a recognition of the great services she had rendered to the cause of Indian art and culture. She continued to sit in Rajya Sabha till 1960. In 1956 she was decorated with Padma Bhushan. In 1958 she received Queen Victoria Silver Medal of the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, London. It was due to her relentless efforts that in 1960 that a law was enacted in the Indian Parliament to prevent cruelty

to animals. In 1964, the Govt. of India appointed her as the Chairman of the Animal Welfare Board. Since then, she continues to hold this post. In 1969 Wayne State University of U. S. A. honoured her with a doctorate. Sangeet Natak Akademi elected her as Fellow in 1968. Same year, she was awarded the title of Prani Mitra by the Animal Welfare Board. (Plate IV 3)

Rukmini Devi is also a leader of the Theosophy movement. Her parents were ardent Theosophists, and she too has been actively associated with many activities of the Theosophical Society. She has to her credit many learned articles and lecture tours in India and abroad. Practically every year, she is invited to one or the other country for delivering lectures on Theosophy. Perhaps Rukmini Devi is the only thinker, who has spread the message of Theosophy and world brotherhood through lectures in Indian philosophy culture and fine art.

Another facet of Rukmini Devi's personality is her dedication to the cause of education. She is a noted educationist, especially in the field of child education. She is associated with many schools and colleges in South India. Perhaps not many people know that she is the pioneer in the field of early child education. It was she who brought Dr. Maria Montessori<sup>e</sup>, the noted child educationist to India. It is after this lady's name that all over India the Montessori

PLATE IV. 3

Rukmini Devi with two tiger cubs

system of education for small children was introduced. Kalakshetra has thus become a model centre of Montessori system also, from where all other institutions have been taking their guidance.

After the India - China war of 1962, Rukmini Devi, took upon herself the important task of rehabilitating and educating the large number of Tibetan children who came to India as refugees.

In the field of social work also Rukmini Devi has outstanding contribution. She has tirelessly worked for the many social reforms. She was responsible for making classical dance a very respectable art. She has been devotedly working towards uplifting the socially and educationally backward sections of the Indian Society. She has mainly concentrated her activities towards the upliftment of orthodox women and educating them about the true philosophy and meaning of the various Indian religions. She is one of the very few social workers, who have brought about awakening in women yet at the same time fully preserving the noble and ancient Indian traditions.

Rukmini Devi has constantly crusaded against animal sacrifices. She is a champion of vegetarianism, and has through her efforts brought about an awareness in the public mind about many things in favour of vegetarianism. She has



also been responsible for a number of positive contributions in the field of animals welfare. It was she who for the first time fearlessly pointed out the various cruelties to which animals are subjected to by Indians in the name of religion or profession. She was mainly responsible for the Government of India Act on the prevention of cruelty to animals. As already stated she continues to be a Chairman of the Animal Welfare Board.

Rukmini Devi combines in herself almost all the noble qualities of Indian womanhood. There are few women in India who have done so much for the country during their own life time. Her personality has thus many facets.

This thesis of course deals with the most important facet-her contribution to Indian dance.