

**BHARATANATYAM ‘REFINED’, ‘RE-DEFINED’:  
ANALYSING DANCE WORKS OF  
RUKMINI DEVI ARUNDALE AND CHANDRALEKHA**

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## **DECLARATION**

I do hereby declare that the work reported in this thesis has been carried out by me individually in the Department of Dance, Sarojini Naidu School of Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad, under the supervision of Prof. Anuradha Jonnalagadda.

I also declare that this work is original and is not submitted for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship, or associateship of any University or Institution.

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## **CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the work contained in the thesis entitled  
**“Bharatanatyam ‘Refined’, ‘Re-defined’: Analysing Dance Works of  
Rukmini Devi Arundale and Chandralekha”** submitted to University of  
Hyderabad by **Ms. P. RADHIKA**, Research scholar, was done under my  
guidance and supervision and the same has not been submitted elsewhere for  
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## Introduction

Bharatanatyam in contemporary times embodies functions, meanings and values embedded through its history. Contributions of some choreographers in Bharatanatyam have become significant as they have worked with aesthetics of the form that are reflective of these phenomena. At the same time, they take liberties to explore the boundaries of the existent grammar and tradition. Rukmini Devi Arundale and Chandralekha were such dancer-choreographers who chose to explore the scope of art expression through the idiom of Bharatanatyam. Rukmini Devi imbibed and translated Bharatanatyam, in a move towards making it 'authentically' traditional and Chandralekha positioned Bharatanatyam on traditional Indian concepts by questioning its religious and hierarchical content. One of them spoke of elements to be 'cleansed'- that were meant to be 'refined', the other spoke of elements to be 'erased' and its tenets to be 're-defined'. Both of them took conscious decisions to create works of art that, according to them, was a product of their culture. However, they defined its aesthetics, to reveal in it, an altered state of existence, where-in, the tradition was either invented or subverted.

The study has attempted to understand choreographies of Rukmini Devi Arundale and Chandralekha by analyzing the subjects and styles in their performance and the critical perspectives that evolve from them. In other words, it has presented analysis of form and content of their choreographic works which are simultaneously informed by relevant socio-cultural, political and historical contexts of their times. It has explored paradigms in critical

interpretive approach and has made use of various analytical perspectives for contextualizing dance.

Commentaries on solo performances or group choreographies in India have been the sole terrain of dance critics who express their subjective and objective views in the form of previews, reviews or articles. Such literature gain relevance from the immediacy of experience, either future or past occurrence, of the dance presentation. For a researcher working on analyzing the formative elements or technicalities involved, for instance in the same choreography, time becomes relevant in ways different to a reviewer or critic. I have dealt with space-time construct in terms of its continuum or disjunction analyzed in relativity- of spaces the work inhabits and time it extends across. Thus explored, it summates in expressions that bring out different perspectives and meanings. For example, it manifests in varying ways with regard to: socio-political time when the concepts or themes and the choreography developed; geo-cultural time with respect to when and where it was presented and the life span of a particular work, and many more ways that the work offers to be explored but all held in tandem with historical time-choreographer's life and chronology of compositions or choreographies.

Much of the history written on Indian dance has had oriental leanings which drew its source from normative Sanskrit texts and its embodied knowledge. It started with the tradition versus modernity dialogue during the nationalist period and was followed by a linear history or old historiography which worked towards bringing a pan-Indian emphasis essentializing upon 'classicizing' of dances and the linking of local with the national both in cultural and political spheres. Post colonial discourse has marked disjunctions and continuities in the history of Bharatanatyam with issues of

national revivalism, hegemony and patriarchy. The immediate history of 'Bharatanatyam' is enmeshed in the politics surrounding the position of Devadasi during the 1920's and 1930's of the nationalist pre-independent period. The position of the 'classicized' dance form during the postcolonial era of independent India, are understood by taking into account contexts of culture, power and history. Bharatanatyam's immediate sources in the oral tradition was overlooked to give direct emphasis to texts far removed centuries behind in time, content and context. The emphasis of deciding on a normative text, seemingly an appendage to orientalist ideology, became more pronounced in an effort to make a tradition look 'authentic'. The living tradition of Sadir was immobilized and grafted to an imagined history to satisfy the burgeoning ideals of a nationalist agenda and its traditions were invented to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. In the process, dance came to represent a political ideology befitting a place in the country's national history. This neo-traditional form<sup>1</sup> was institutionalized and given a 'classical' stature to be showcased as a timeless and exotic art form.

Understanding and studying the changes in a form over a longitudinal span of time involves analysis of the dance in relation to its context-immediate and larger. My approach, that has entailed analysis of some choreographic works of Rukmini Devi and Chandralekha makes a contextual study and understands the patterns underlying changes brought by their contribution. The present work has thus looked at the transitional phase of Bharatanatyam by focusing on the important contributions of these two pioneers with attempts to throw new light on systematic theories of dance or dance ideology that have come up.

## **Sources of Study and Review of Literature**

Literature available on this area of study dealing critically and simultaneously with both contents and contexts are sparse. Data that are available to form readings of choreographic works are majorly derived from primary sources, whereas, it is both primary information and secondary sources or interpretations that have supplemented the contextual readings. As the study has entailed analysis of dance works that are phenomena closely linked to an individual, its primary sources have been from live or recordings of - performances, lecture demonstrations, interviews and discussions on choreographies. Primary written sources are in the form of brochures of performances, published interviews and seminar papers or articles written by the choreographer; some works that provide firsthand ethnographic study on the role and dance of the devadasis and; the pedagogical and aesthetic perspectives of Bharatanatyam as illustrated in books by dancers themselves based on their embodied knowledge and experience.

Apart from these, printed matter in the form of previews and reviews of performances, articles on the choreographer- on their life and works, biographies, studies on concepts or subject specific areas that are illustrated or relevant in the choreography that help in understanding and interpreting, provide with other kinds of secondary data. Data from critical research on contextualizing dance developed from various perspectives are those that have delved on the role or position of the dance form and not necessarily or directly connected with analysis of its technique. They include works that have recovered and addressed the repressed and suppressed history of the Devadasi and subjects dealing with sociological and anthropological concerns of the Devadasi community, (Amrit Srinivasan:1984;1985 and Anandhi,S:1991) ethnographic details of devadasi tradition (Saskia

Kersenboom:1986) and historical accounts of the events at the Madras Music Academy with respect to the incidents preceding the Devadasi abolition act and the contribution of E. Krishna Iyer in the 'revival' of Bharatanatyam (Arudra: 1986;1997). These, apart from offering me the socio-cultural and political context for study on Rukmini Devi's work, have also been evaluated to bring out the exclusionary politics played by the local politicians as well as cultural bodies like Madras Music academy that are shown to have surmounted a manipulative politics of presentation.

In terms of those works which have positioned Bharatanatyam and Rukmini Devi within the nationalist rhetoric of post colonial discourse, Matthew Harp Allen's (1997) relooking at issues of 'appropriation', 'repopulation' of Bharatanatyam, Anne Marie Gaston's work on the changing sociology of the form (1990; 1991; 1996), Srividya Natarajan's unpublished PhD thesis (1997) on the transmogrification of *Sadir* as Bharatanatyam and her analysis of some of the writings associated with the period have all looked at issues in context. My work has drawn from these and has also added to the available critical data in the sense of its delving with many other issues gathered mainly from discursive analysis (technical analysis of dance and dance literature) of Rukmini Devi's solo and dance drama form that has added to the critical discourse-in-practice. Apart from this, works that have relocated Rukmini Devi as one who contemporized and globalized the history of Indian performing arts towards a transnational perspective of global modernity (Meduri: 2004; 2005; 2005a; 2005b; 2005c) have been critically looked at. A different take to this perspective has been rendered substantiated against reigning facts.

Balasaraswati's articles and book (1959; 1982; 1984) on Bharatanatyam throws light on the form from a traditional performer's perspective giving importance to aspects of solo performance and its emphasis on the philosophy of the dancing body of *Sadir*. It has offered many reference points to me in terms of providing scope for understanding the many changes that were included to the Bharatanatyam by Rukmini Devi and Chandralekha. Sarada's book on Rukmini Devi is the only available book that has extensively dealt with both her biography and Kalakshetra's history with important details on each and every dance drama composition of Rukmini Devi. Apart from this, the Kalakshetra quarterly (1986) commemorating Rukmini Devi's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and a special volume on her by Nartanam (2003) have provided with the many writings on her by her students, theosophist friends and well wishers (Ramnarayan: 1984a; 1984b, Kothari: 2003). The two volume edition on the writings and speeches of Rukmini Devi edited by Shakunthala Ramani (2004) has also been an essential book that gives perspectives of the many facets of Rukmini Devi's personality.

The writings that have contributed towards understanding of Chandralekha's biographical history as well as about her philosophy of dance are Barucha, 1995; Lakshmi, 2003; and many of her own writings (1979; 1980; 1984; 1990; 1991; 1992; 1994). Uttara Asha Coorlawala's doctoral thesis (1994) 'Classical and contemporary Indian Dance: Overview, Criteria and Choreographic Analysis' that deals with concepts of both classical and contemporary Indian dance and the classification of its types under major heads, has a small portion on her analysis of parts of Chandralekha's *Angika*. Similar, are her remarks on Chandralekha's *Sri* (1999) that have looked critically at the available analytical assumptions on them. Contextualizing on feminist perspectives, Chatterjea (1998;1999) analyses *Angika*, *Sri*, *Yantra*, *Raga* and *Sloka*. My work has looked at Chandralekha's language on body that has

challenged the existent norms of depicting body in dance or otherwise in daily parlance. It has taken her other works like *Prana* and *Sharira* for analysis where it has drawn from and added to the available interpretations. At the same time, I have also expressed alternate opinions. This entire research work has thus interpreted and dealt critically both with contents and contexts of Rukmini Devi's and Chandralekha's dance works that are shown to have altered the history of the dance form. As this academic work focuses on two very important dancer choreographers of the Indian dance scene, it will be a vital contribution towards enriching critical data available by raising pertinent questions associated with their work and contribution to the form and create platforms for future dialogues to different ways of understanding a dynamic art form like dance.

## **Methodology**

My research methodology, the way in which dance is described and analysed, derives its significance from both the dance's aesthetic presence and from locating it in its context and discourses-in-practice. 'Methods are techniques used in collecting data. Methodology refers to assumptions you have as a researcher, which can be epistemological or political in character, or mean that you support the view of the world promoted by a particular theoretical tradition' says Travers (2001,vi). In this work, methods have been decided by data necessary for the progress of the study. The performing body is seen, in some studies, as part of signifying systems that are themselves always already incorporated, embodied and where the inevitable interactive existence of bodies and systems of signification are underlined. This is reflected in studies that use ethnomethodology. In my research, along with this methodology, I also consider how historically and culturally located

systems of power/ knowledge construct subjects and their worlds that are referred to as 'discourses'.

My strategy of enquiry is based on empirical concerns embodied in ethnomethodological programs of research and the contemporaneous studies of institutional and historical discourses presented in Foucauldian discourse analysis. As I have been more concerned with interpretive practice and reality construction, I have drawn on ethnomethodological and Foucauldian analytics together more explicitly. This is not simply another attempt to bridge the so-called macro/micro divide. The analytics of interpretive practice is such an effort. As Gubrium and Holstein (2000, 497-503) state, 'It centers on the interplay, not the synthesis, of discursive practice and discourses-in-practice, the tandem projects of ethnomethodology and Foucauldian discourse analysis'. This is realised through the methodology of, what they call, 'Analytical bracketing' which is an 'orienting procedure for alternately focusing on the *whats* and then the *hows* of interpretive practice'. My methodology of research has, I feel, gained substantially from the presence of this tool which I have, in fact, unconsciously followed and was happily surprised to find. The process is explained thus- 'Bracketing the *whats*, footing for explaining the constructive nuances of social patterns can be found in discursive practice. Bracketing the *hows*, footing for explaining the delimited patterns of meaning consequent to social construction processes can be found in discourses-in-practice'. 'The latter also provides the footing for answering why discursive practice proceeds in the direction it does, toward what end, in pursuit of what goals, in relation to what meanings'. Such an interplay sustains an integral critical consciousness for qualitative inquiry when either one is foregrounded, thus turning the analytics on itself as it pursues its goals transforming in the process, analytical bracketing into 'critical bracketing'. This offers a basis not only for documenting interpretive practice but also for commenting critically on its own constructions.



In this thesis, I have been largely influenced by Post-structuralist thought which rejects the idea of a literary text/ here, dance text, having one purpose, one meaning or one singular existence. As a post-structuralist critic must be able to utilize a variety of perspectives to create a multifaceted (perhaps even conflicting) interpretation of a text, it is particularly important to analyse how the meanings of a text shift in relation to certain variables (usually involving the identity of the reader). Critical perspectives have been used to understand the shifts in meaning. Adshead (1999,18 ) writing on Intertextuality in Interpretation in Dance says, 'By selecting one contextual framework and then another, the 'text' can be 'read' in a multiplicity of ways and these partial perspectives are themselves treated as threads of the intertextual web'. As analysis of dance goes through stages of description, interpretation and evaluation, it provides a structure according to Adshead (1988) for the knowledge that is needed to frame interpretations. As the study proceeds, it will explore the theory of intertextuality by juxtaposing narratives from variety of sources bringing to our notice multiple texts embedded within these works. These texts overlap to create intertexts and their unraveling would help to determine disjunctions within the so called continuities

In this research, analysis of content has sought reference from old Sanskrit texts to enunciate the technicalities involved in dance, yogic concepts, mudras, etc., and at the same time, themes and issues arising from positioning the works in their context (immediate and larger) has been looked at from different perspectives. Data for close description of movement sequences was gathered from notes taken during performances, workshops, rehearsals both live and recorded and interviews. Participant observation has not been totally in-situ as it was felt that developing objectivity and critical outlook would become distorted in such a case. And as dances that have been

dealt here are not so culture specific to have its own codes that are beyond understanding, training undertaken in the art forms earlier and during the course of research, from artists who follow those traditions, have proven invaluable. For example: embodied training knowledge experience of Bharatanatyam from Kalakshetra, Yoga, Kalaripayattu, contemporary Indian- western dance.

Analysis is embodied in any form of appreciation of arts. It is the basis of knowledge and experience and serves to extend that knowledge and enrich that experience. Dance form analysis has engaged in description or documentation with disclosure of implicit existent grammar within the discursive practice of presentation of the dance piece. This has involved taking into account the conceptual structure of movements present, examination of its parts, synthesis of the results with contextual analysis in the process of interpretation and evaluation, involving, in brief, description, interpretation and evaluation. Interpretive analysis has been conducted on two or three dance pieces of each of Rukmini Devi and Chandralekha in which the contents, concepts and contexts of the choreographies have been delineated. Textual analysis and critical theorizing have been informed by ideas of post structuralism that uses tools like deconstruction and new historical method.

## **Chapterisation**

The chapter one has provided inputs to the historical discourse on devadasi. It acts as a prologue that locates the immediate history of Bharatanatyam amongst the discourses-in-practice. This chapter has looked at the positioning of the performer and the performed – the Devadasi and

Bharatanatyam during the pre-independence, the politics of power and role of Madras Music Academy which had dominantly chartered the futures of both. I show here how in more than one way, the entire reform movement which was to have aimed at removing the shackles of caste and gender based professional vulnerability that surrounded the devadasi, where she was gradually turned to a passive sex object, got lost in the clamour to get her married and ultimately the very identity of the devadasi was nullified and obscured to create the stage for entry of 'respectable women'. I also critically look at the pro-art stance of Music Academy that in the face of consolidating its cultural prowess with political maneuvering had apparently outweighed addressing the genuine concerns of the devadasis and their art.

The chapters two and three have dealt with analytic interpretation of Rukmini Devi's dances. Interpretation of some of her initial solo performances are based on textual analysis and those on her dance dramas are from both directly observed records, participative notes and embodied knowledge of prior training from Kalakshetra, Chennai. Among her dance dramas, I have analysed parts of *Sabari moksham* of the Ramayana series. The parts of which are scenes- *Panchapsaras*, *Jatayu Patra pravesham* and *Surpanakha Patra pravesham*, The initial years of Rukmini Devi and her dance is located in the nationalizing agenda where her ordained role as 'World mother' through theosophy and culture, echoed with the myths of 'revival', 'refinement' of Bharatanatyam. Rukmini Devi's dance dramas are positioned against the national context of a nation coming to terms with its newly independent status. I look at how her 'mission' of 'spirituality' through dance earlier infused into and propagated through her solo performances, was continued in her dance-dramas too as she found dance-drama as one of the ways 'to educate people to understand divinity and express reverence'.

The fourth chapter on Chandralekha's dance works has included analysis of *Prana* and *Sharira* and their discursive practices. Her work has received attention in the resistive discourses with feminist perspective. Here, discourses on her 'redefining' Bharatanatyam and redefining the feminine emerge from her discursive practices. Chandralekha proclaimed her individuality in the 1970's and 80's when she began to explore the formal richness of Bharatanatyam to create an entirely new language set to traditional concepts and themes. I look at how she questioned the tenets of the mainstream and suffused its alternate existence by 'redefining' cultural codes. Chandralekha's works have been found radical at being unconventional and individualistic with a strong and bold body language. Her works are concept-driven with explorations into the formal aspects of Bharatanatyam and Kalarippayattu and rejection of *Mukhaja abhinaya*.

Chandralekha's works from *Devadasi* (1961) and *Navagraha* (1972) to *Sharira* (2001) are based on Indian traditional concepts which are made relevant to our present times. "Where does the body begin... and where does it end?" remained a perennial question for her. This quest continued both in her art and life. The importances of esoteric Indian concepts like mandala, yantra, navagraha, kaala, Ardhanarishwara, bindu, srichakra, etc., were explored with a contemporary mind and contextualized with a modern sensibility. In this study, it is also seen how Chandra explored these concepts through dance, questioned and subverted the many dominant ideas existing in the Indian cultural fabric

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<sup>1</sup> 'Neo' means new or revived in a new form. Bharatanatyam is supposedly a 'revived' traditional dance which was earlier called by the name *Sadir*. So, it can be considered to be a neo-traditional form.

# Chapter 1

## Dancing to whose tunes?

### The Devadasi in ‘reformist’ and ‘revivalist’ discourse in Pre-independent India

Bharatanatyam’s history has been made and unmade at different times. The living tradition of *Sadir* was immobilized and grafted in to the reformist and revivalist politics for satisfying the burgeoning ideals of a nationalist agenda. This chapter looks at the positioning of the performer and the performed – the Devadasi and Bharatanatyam during the pre-independence and the politics of power and role of Madras Music Academy associated with it which has dominantly chartered their futures.

Let us look at some of the socio-political developments which acted as precursors to the Devadasi Abolition Act of 1947. In 1906-07 an international convention for eradication of immoral traffic in women and children was referred to India for endorsement. Following this, in 1912, three Indian members of the Imperial Legislative Council –Dadabhoy, Mudholkar and Magde presented three separate bills aimed against the Devadasi System. Subsequently a bill was drafted in 1913. In 1922, following a resolution moved by Dr. Hari Singh Gour ‘recommending a law prohibiting the wholesale traffic in minor girls for immoral purposes ostensibly intended as Devadasis but in reality used for indiscriminate and immoral purposes’, the age of dedication for girls was raised from 16 to 18<sup>1</sup>. In 1925, due to the

efforts of Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, the penal code provision regarding trafficking in minor girls was extended to the devadasis. Following this the Madras Legislative Council, in 1927, considered and later in 1929 legislated 'The Madras Act of 1929' enfranchising '*inams*' and '*maniams*'<sup>2</sup> to the hereditary devadasis without any obligation of providing service to the temples. Not being satisfied with this, Muthulakshmi Reddy of the Women's India Association, again in 1930, introduced in the Madras legislative Council a bill on the "Prevention of dedication of women to Hindu temples in the Presidency of Madras". The bill which was popularly known as the Devadasi Abolition Bill consisted of the following demands- to declare the *Pottukattu*<sup>3</sup> ceremony in the precincts of Hindu temples or any other place of worship as unlawful; to give legal sanction to the devadasis to contract marriage; and prescribe a minimum punishment of five years imprisonment for those who were found guilty of aiding and abetting the Devadasi System<sup>4</sup>. Later, the Madras Devadasis (Prevention of dedication) Act of 1947 was passed by the Congress ministry in Madras in free India, abolishing temple dedications so that marriage became legally valid for all women of the *Melakkarar/Isai Vellalla* (Devadasi) community.<sup>5</sup> Almost alongside the second half of the above mentioned sequence of events leading to the Devadasi Abolition Act, there was resurgence in the interest in 'revival' of the dance form of the same community of traditional dancers. Before elaborating on the cultural politics associated with the reformists and the revivalists, let us examine the some of the important historical events that led to a socio-cultural renaissance resulting in a rise of political and national consciousness in the 19<sup>th</sup> century India.

The British Policy on education in India bears a direct influence on the creation of reform and revival discourse. Two schools of thought in England which shaped the British policy on Indian education were the missionary party and the anti-missionary party. Education in India under the British

rule during the later half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century drew attention to the civilization and languages of India as a measure against consolidating their hold over the country. Monetary grants were given to orientalists or the anti-missionary members to study India, its religion and culture. As part of this, Asiatic society was founded in 1784 by Sir William Jones. Research into ancient Indian history and culture by indologists awakened the curiosity and interest of Indians. Indology exposed a past which was culturally very rich and ancient and also made it possible for Indians to have an understanding of their national culture. The pride and self confidence generated by such understanding awakened the national consciousness of Indians. On the other hand, the missionary party headed by William Wiber Force, who was the director of East India Company, was of the view that Indians needed enlightenment from Christian thought and the propagation and acceptance of Christianity by itself would cure all the ills India was suffering from. Warren Hastings (First Governor-General of India, 1774-1781), Malcolm and Munroe, with their wider experience of India, knew that the view of pro-missionary group was incorrect. But missionary view prevailed with the government Charter reserved by the Act of 1813<sup>6</sup> which provided for one lakh grant for education of Indians and for securing an Episcopal establishment in India. Finally in 1835 a resolution incorporated Lord Macaulay's ideas<sup>7</sup> preferring English to Oriental studies where teaching of western science and literature through English medium was introduced.

After the Wood's dispatch of 1854<sup>8</sup>, departments of education were created and established at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras (1857). But scientific and technical education was largely neglected though the Dispatch advocated it. After establishing unquestioned authority of the British in India, the East India Company realized that to sustain their market in India, after the industrial revolution, some modernization of the people was required, while too much may jeopardize their rule. There was a rise of humanism due to the

French revolution and with it an inflow of liberal ideas from the west. Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated an end to inhuman practices like Sati, female infanticide, human sacrifice, etc., and Sir. William Bentick (Governor-General 1828-1835) brought a 'Regulation of 1829' declaring sati as 'culpable homicide' and abolished these evil customs. An important effect of the British rule in India was the Indian awakening which led to the national movement. A new self-consciousness came to the surface, both from the positive contributions of British rule like administrative efficiency, improved communications and rule of law and from its negative features like economic exploitation and social discrimination. The renaissance which commenced in the nineteenth century profoundly influenced the development of modern India. India started 'rediscovering' her past.

Religious reform movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were largely a result of the impact of modern western culture. These were attempts to preserve the separate identities in the face of the challenges of western thought to traditional values. At the same time, these movements sought to remove the defects and injustices in the existing social system to enable the latter to meet the challenges better. Almost all the religious reform movements sought the abolition of the caste system and the removal of corruption from the established forms of religious worship. There was always a social purpose in religious reform. Thus the abolition of Sati, recognition of widow remarriage and women's education, removal of caste inequalities etc were all socio-religious in character. A rational approach to religion automatically affected social values and caused changes. Some of the important religious reform movements were the Bramho Samaj, the Arya Samaj, the Theosophical society, the Ramakrishna Mission, the Aligarh movement, the Akali movement, etc.



These reform movements brought in a socio-cultural renaissance leading to a rise of political and national consciousness. Major personalities who were involved in these events could thus be basically divided into two: the conservatives, who gave importance to ancient traditions and believed in recreating the 'glory of the past' and the liberals who accommodative of the changes in society found a balance between the ancient traditions and the new liberal ideas of the west. Likewise, the reformists and revivalists who were associated with events which led to the Devadasi Abolition Act generally termed as the 'anti-nautch' campaign were mostly those who aligned with their liberal or progressive and conservative tendencies. As English education in Madras owed more to Christian missionaries, there was a greater missionary zeal for abolishing the Devadasi dancers which according to them went against their Victorian convictions of maintaining social purity and virgin hood in persons involved in service to gods. The devadasis according to them were committing blasphemy by not remaining celibate.

The reform lobbyists constituted of missionaries, doctors, journalists, administrators and social workers. Amrit Srinivasan (1985, 1874) in her anthropological study of the devadasi community of Tamilnadu says, 'Science, religion and the politics of reform became absolutely intertwined in the person of the female missionary/ doctor towards the close of the twentieth century. Through the sensational and selective publicisation of the medical 'facts' of immature sex, missionaries sought to discredit upper-caste customs and habits on humanistic grounds'. Missionary doctors like Dr. Clara Swain<sup>9</sup>, the first woman physician with a medical diploma, who was sent to India by the American Methodists Foreign Missionary society, voiced their concerns against child marriage and its damaging effects on personal health in communities including the upper-castes and devadasis. There was an initial disinterest by the colonial administration, as Freitag (1996, 212) says,

‘in dealing with issues related to religion, kinship and other forms of community identity which it labeled as apolitical- as private, special interest and domestic and therefore not requiring the attention of the state and its institutions’. But with the pitching in of missionaries followed by reformists, the issue of abolition of devadasi system gained prominence.

Journalists and writers like Katherine Mayo, Miss Tenant, and Marcus Fuller were among others who commented on the plight of the devadasis and condemned their performances. Katherine Mayo, an American feminist was expressly recruited by a defensive colonial government in India in the 1920’s, as Oldenberg (1984) points out, to produce a book at least as negatively compelling as her earlier malevolent book on the Philippines, that would discredit the nationalist movement in India<sup>10</sup>. She first wrote the high handedly notorious ‘Mother India’ and later, ‘Slaves of the Gods’. Miss Tenant, as Khokar (1987, 43) puts it, was a British lady who came to Madras to specifically collect signatures from social high-ups as part of a campaign against the devadasi order and Marcus Fuller (wife of a missionary) whose book, ‘The wrongs of Indian womanhood’ was published in 1900<sup>11</sup>, condemned nautch performances in public entertainments. There were also administrators, nationalists and freedom fighters some of whom like Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, Sarojini Naidu, Gandhiji, Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, Keshaub Chandra Sen, E.V.Ramaswami Naicker and others who strongly condemned the dedication of minor girls in this system and held the society and people responsible who encouraged and supported this practice responsible for the degradation of the position of women associated with the practice of dancing.

As Srinivasan (1985,1873) claims, ‘By the 1920s the anti- nautch agitation had become inextricably linked up with the communal politics of the Dravidian movement. The abolition of the practice of female dedication

became a powerful political and legislative cause espoused by the backward non-brahmins as part of the over all self-respect campaign initiated by Ramaswamy Naicker in 1925'. E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker or Periyar as he was known in his later years, who started the *Suyamariyadai iyakkam* or the Self Respect movement, was initially a strong supporter of congress and worked for the independence struggle. He had left a well paid government job and joined the congress at the behest of noted congressman C. Rajagopalachari. He later quit congress to join Justice Party when he found that some main issues against caste discrimination which he strongly vouched for was sidelined by the party. In 1935, he started the Self Respect movement and worked towards his goal of upliftment of the morale and social conditions of the downtrodden and the so called 'lower' castes in South India. It wanted to do away with the varna system of linking caste to profession which had imposed the practice of restricting 'low' castes to doing only menial jobs in society. The party ideals aimed at the reform of the community at large which also included working towards de-linking devadasis from practicing their hereditary profession. Periyar noticed that their ritual status was a farce in the face of their sexual contract and economic investment they brought to the temple. His party gave the women who had walked out of their devadasi life an opportunity to voice their concerns against this system and encouraged other such women to also denounce the profession. One such courageous and outspoken lady was Moovalur Ramamritam Ammaiyar who first joined the congress and then left it to join the *Suyamariyaadai Iyakkam* of Periyar.

Dr.Muthulakshmi Reddy, another prominent social reformer, was a medical doctor and also the first woman legislator in British India. She was fiercely involved in putting forward her ideas against the perpetuation of devadasi system. Though known as a progressive reformist who later started the Avvai rural medical service and Cancer research institute at Chennai, she was bent

on ‘purifying’ the devadasi by making them compulsorily married so that they become ‘chaste wives, loving mothers and useful citizens’<sup>12</sup>. Her reform was aimed at marriage, more precisely an exercise towards satisfying the prerequisites of patriarchal notions of an ideal woman than any kind of reform aimed at improving the living conditions of the female members of the devadasi community as such. Though her intentions were to prevent dedication of young girls, her ire was a misplaced one. She blamed the hereditary community as a ‘set of prostitutes’ ‘from a most objectionable class of people in the society’ rather than blaming the perpetrators of the crime guised as patrons who enjoyed sexual favours in the name of sexual contracts which bound the devadasis.

The case brought forth initially against the prevalence of child marriage in Indian society by the missionaries and the early reformers shifted its focus to child marriages/ dedications among hereditary dancers dedicated to temples at the hands of reformist politicians. As only in the case of devadasis, there was no provision of claiming legal rights over relationship or property, they as targets became vulnerable under the eyes of law. Any other child or woman not from this community would have enjoyed the position of a legally wedded wife. The Madras act of 1929 which enfranchised the devadasis with *inams* and *maniams* and seemed to favour them financially was a covert suggestion informing them that their services would no longer be required or rewarded from then on. This act was sleazy enough to be enacted much before the Prevention of Dedication Act of 1947 as the devadasis were left to scramble for safety from a situation where they were fast losing hold over their profession, were completely unsure about the issues of legal protection for themselves, their children and other dependants and would soon be facing an insecure future. During these eighteen years (1929-1947) many changes happened within the social make-up of the community. The house hold activities earlier controlled by the *taikkizhavi*<sup>13</sup> began to cease and collapse

as the male members of the community began to claim their share over the new *manyams* and *inams*. As Srinivasan (1985, 1874) points out, 'the process of converting traditional usufructury rights to public land (attached to office) into private taxable 'property' however favoured the men over their women folk in that they too could now inherit the shares earlier kept aside for their dedicated sisters'. The entire socio-domestic system of the devadasis began falling apart. In such a situation even if they were to get married, it would not have been accepted as legal nor could their offspring have claimed any legal right as the clause providing legal sanction to devadasis to contract marriage was passed only in 1947. Till such time their personal and professional life was totally under the mercy of a few wealthy patrons.

Devadasis began to be denounced and disowned by their own community of Sengundars and Isai Vellalars who formed caste associations and supported the devadasi abolition bill as 'they denounced devadasis as a dishonour to their castes and as an impediment to their progress as caste groups' (Anandhi 1991, 741). Many of the dancers were still attached to temples but without the privileges that they had earlier enjoyed. They were like helpless fishes trapped in a breached tank. The delay in the enactment of the Prevention of Dedication Bill due to the indifference and reluctance shown by some senior conservative congress men like C. Rajagopalachari and S. Satyamurthy<sup>14</sup> to name a few, only seemed intentional as the fact remains for us to see that devadasis who left their profession either started teaching privately (like in the case of Mylapore Gowriammal or Karaikkal Saradammal who taught at Kalakshetra) or went into oblivion. They never came to limelight as a professional proscenium dancer. The entire reform movement which was to have aimed at removing the shackles of caste and gender based professional vulnerability that surrounded the devadasi where, she was gradually turned to a passive sex object, got lost in the clamour to

get her married and ultimately the very identity of the devadasi was nullified and obscured to create the stage for entry of 'respectable women'.

It is ironical that these years which saw reform directed on devadasi also saw their dance known as 'Sadir' as being renamed as 'Bharatanatyam' at the hands of another group of individuals called revivalists who encouraged its learning and performing amongst a different community. As the early rumblings of reform in India effected by people like Rajaram Mohan Roy or Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar found its echo in the 'reform' of the community of dancing girls in the south, so was the effect of other such movements like Theosophical movement, Ramakrishna mission, Arya samaj which also found some of its followers in the form of 'revivalists' of Sadir in the south. This is when the Madras Music Academy began to play a major role in the so called 'revival' or 'renaissance' of Sadir. E. Krishna Iyer, one of the founding members of the Music Academy was hailed as a 'Knight in shining armour who stepped into the battle to help save the dance', the damsel 'in distress', and assist the 'transfiguration of the sullied Sadir into blessed Bharatanatyam'(Arudra.1986,17). The 'sullied Sadir' of the hereditary dancer from the precincts of the Holy temple was waiting at the threshold of proscenium stage to undergo purificatory rites prescribed by self appointed cultural priests or ambassadors to turn itself into 'blessed Bharatanatyam' of the non-hereditary dancer.

If the 1929 Madras act of enfranchising devadasis with *inams* and *manyams* was just tip of an iceberg, the introduction of 'Prevention of Dedication' bill in 1930 by Muthulakshmi Reddy showed the initial signs to the enormity of an impending disaster yet to strike the hereditary community. Subramaniam (2006), commenting on the making of the modern classical tradition, says that, Madras Music Academy 'presided over what was quintessentially the world of modern classical music, a form it reinvented as a self-conscious

cultural practice and wove into the larger and compelling narrative of nation building'. She finds that there was a clear shift in the social and demographic profile of Madras after the 1860's when the first batch of graduates emerged from Madras University. 68.8% of the graduates were Brahmins though they formed only 3.1% of the total population. The earlier elite groups from the commercial class of society began to be replaced by the new Telugu and Tamil Brahmin professional elites. The culture of *kathakalakshepam* and classical music like carnatic music became the hallmark of the brahmin's cultural identity. Dance as part of the religious ritual in temples had to also become a vital stake holder in the cultural renaissance that was being brought about in spite of the issues of the 'purity' of the temples being 'spoiled' by the devadasis. The reformist's struggle to abolish the dedication of devadasis only came as a blessing in disguise for the revivalists for whom, the prime intention was to 'save' and 'revive' Sadir dance form and not devadasi, the dancer. The work undertaken by S.Satyamurthy of the Madras congress is a typical case in point representing the opinion of conservative nationalists. He was instrumental in mobilizing the support in favour of the dasi system but the fact of the matter was that he feared that 'if the system was abolished, the non Brahmins would demand the abolition of temple priests (who were Brahmins)'. This issue was very sensitive but when such a demand was becoming more plausible with the rising popularity of Self respect movement of Periyar, Satyamurthy did not bother to argue that, 'devadasi families should dedicate atleast one girl to the Hindu temples instead of many'<sup>15</sup> and at the same time persuade Muthulakshmi Reddy 'to introduce a separate bill so that the non-brahmins did not demand other things such as the dispensing of temple *archakas* of the Brahmin caste'<sup>16</sup>.

In January 1928, a committee was formed for the starting of an Academy of Music at Madras and it was inaugurated in August the same year. All these were the outcome of an All India music conference held in Madras for the

first time during the event of the annual session of Indian National Congress held in the city in 1927. In 1930, an article entitled '*Bharata Natyam*' written by V. Venkatarama Sharma of the University of Madras appeared on the Academy's very first quarterly journal. Arudra (1986, 18) points out how by publishing this, a 'scholarly explanation of the Natya Sastra, the Academy demonstrated its faith that the classical dances constituted an integral part of Sangita'. This marked the Academy's entry to decisively create, construct and condition public opinion in the realm of culture. From then on, the activities of Music academy wielded substantial power to inspire to chart out and decide upon a history of the traditional form of Sadir for the modern times. E. Krishna Iyer, before taking up the issue of dance as the founder-secretary of Music academy, had donned the role of female characters and danced in dramas presented in various amateur organizations. He had learnt Sadir from a devadasi, Madurantakam Jagadambal<sup>17</sup> from Triplicane and later from Melattur Natesa Iyer. It is also evident from his writings that the devadasis still danced at temples, marriages and private functions but not at sabhas though they gave training in dance to actors. It was at the insistence of Natesa Iyer that Krishna Iyer took upon himself the mission of 'reviving dance'. He recounts thus: 'Natesa Iyer told me that (Bharatanatyam) was a refined art and divine too, and that he was waiting to find a cultured pupil to take to this art and rescue it from the hands of the decadent devadasis and that I was a fit person to learn it and then do propaganda by precept and practice and bring about its revival for which he had been yearning" (Arudra. 1997, 22).

Krishna Iyer used a two step agenda to pursue this duty. According to him, the first step was, to 'alter the attitude of the public about the devadasis' by arranging the showcasing of their performances on 'platforms of dignity' before gatherings of 'respectable people' and second, for persuading 'educated young girls belonging to respectable families in learning and performing the



dance'<sup>18</sup>. The devadasi thus became a proverbial goose at the hands of cultural revivalists. And thus began the era of 'cultured' pupils offering 'platforms of dignity' to 'decadent' devadasis for dancing to 'respectable' audience and encouraging girls from 'respectable' families to take up dance. Prevalence of such high-edged qualifiers in the revivalist discourse meant implicit and stark ideological oppositions exerted in binary extrapolatory terms. It simply negated devadasis from being in anyway seen as 'respectable' or 'cultured' and their performance context from being 'dignified'. The remedial measure was to portray devadasi dance in 'right' light on the stage to regulate and develop a morally 'correct' discourse around their dance for mobilizing public opinion about the value and importance of the art form. The issue of basic rights of individual choice of devadasis were sidestepped and suspended to pursue the ideals of a dominant cultural canon.

Were the devadasis allowed to have a say in their own future? The conservatives comprising of revivalists, progressives represented by reformists and caste associations of Isai Vellalars and Sengundars, all of whom took different stands on the devadasi issue. For the conservative nationalists, devadasis were 'signifiers' of indigenous culture which needed to be preserved under conditions of colonial domination. Reformers portrayed devadasis as immoral and unchaste to be married off and thus 'exalted' to acquire the credentials of a stereotypical Hindu wife and caste associations considered them as a dishonour to their castes and an impediment to their political motives. Anandi (1991, 741), sees how though they 'took diametrically opposite positions on the question of devadasi abolition, all their discourses shared a common feature: their real concern, while they spoke about devadasis, was not devadasis, but issues other than devadasis, and devadasis were a mere trope for them to address these other issues'

On 28<sup>th</sup> December 1932, before the Academy began presenting devadasis on its stage, Music academy had mooted a resolution towards encouragement of Sadir which it later adopted unanimously. Here, the case of suggestions offered by G.A. Johnson, assistant editor of Madras Mail, who was also invited to partake in the discussion on the 'Nautch Question', is drawn in comparison with the final resolution adopted by the Academy. This proves to articulate how the Academy's mechanism of dominance is effected by a marginalization of the hereditary dancers and designed towards construction of a 'classical' canon. An excerpt from Johnson's letter goes like this:

"This refers to the public performance of the "Nautch" which I understand many reformers wish to discourage. It is reasonable to suppose: (I) That if it is intended to reform the 'devadasis', they must be given an alternative profession. Public performances of the dance should provide them with lucrative opportunities to display their talents.

(II) If the dance is to be free from its less respectable associations, the encouragement of public display appears to be the best way to do it. Private parties tend to encourage the notion of lack of respectability. Public functions on the other hand, show the dance for what it is. Lack of respectability might best be removed by attendance at these public functions of respectable people."<sup>19</sup>

Such a view advocated a constructive approach directed at empowering the devadasis both economically and artistically. Apart from actively improving their self sustainability, this view also augured well to help in developing the art through encouragement by a qualitative interaction within the public domain where ideas are debatable. Instead of taking a compatible resolution towards these ends, it was unfortunate that only his last suggestion of overcoming disrespect to the dance by inviting 'respectable public' as audience gained the prime focus.

Now let us turn our focus towards the final outcome of the resolution adopted by the Music academy. Arudra (1986, 20) quotes this as ‘the final text of the remarkable resolution’.

1. ‘Bharata Natyam as a great and an ancient art being unexceptionable, this conference views with concern its rapid decline and appeals to the public and art associations to give it the necessary encouragement.
2. This conference requests the Music academy, Madras, to take steps to disseminate correct ideas regarding the art and to help the public to a proper appreciation thereof.
3. This conference is of opinion that it is desirable that, to start with, women’s organizations do take immediate steps to give proper training in the art, by instituting a course of instruction for the same.
4. This conference is of opinion that, in order to make dancing respectable, it is necessary to encourage public performances thereof before respectable gatherings.’

This act of Music academy was a significant start in terms of measurably relocating a major thrust of the devadasi argument from the strategy of the reformists to that of the revivalists- from the ‘reform of devadasi’ to the ‘revival of dance’. It worked on creating and projecting a ‘then and now’ of the dance, widening the gap of opposition between both. Thus the polarity that extended to represent Bharatanatyam as a ‘great’ and ‘unexceptionable’ art from the ‘ancient’ past was meant to place Sadir on a scale that was diametrically opposite to show its rapidly declining and ‘ill- reputed’ present. The most notable decision of all was the renaming of Sadir as Bharatanatyam. It was done as Arudra (1986, 20) opines, ‘to remove the unsavoury connotations of the priorly existing names like Sadir, Dasiattam, etc’ as ‘Sadir, which had entered a ‘respectable’ home, had been given a new lease of life under a new name. Just like girls given in marriage’. Following this, the resolution ‘to disseminate correct ideas regarding the art’ meant action which was but a veiled and shallow reason to enable a decisive power

hold over what is right and what is wrong for channeling the dominantly 'correct' ideas. This also meant promoting and propagating the norms and ideals of the academy in becoming self appointed guardians and regulators of culture. An easy reference to how a new cultural consciousness was manipulated by visibly deleting components of the old, can be seen from this:

‘...the Academy organized several more (recitals) in what may be termed its first decade of dance. In doing so, it laid emphasis on presenting artists whose performances conformed to its own ideals, and on using a dulcet veena and twin tamburas for accompaniment instead of such instruments as the clarionet. Consequently the performances projected a soft and subdued atmosphere with rich emotional overtones. The free flow of melody and the rhythms held in restraint evoked the admiration of critical savants.’ (Arudra. 1986, 20)

The nationalistic beginnings of Music Academy, the renaming of Sadir as Bharatanatyam to ‘give it a new lease of life’, its cause for projecting the new Bharatanatyam as part of cultural resurgence, all formed part of a greater dialogue on nationalist discourse.

From 1931 onwards, the Music Academy started presenting Sadir performances of dancers from hereditary communities or devadasis. From a compilation of data on dancers of the first decade presented at Music Academy by Arudra (1986, 21)<sup>20</sup> and Gaston (1990, 16)<sup>21</sup>, it can be gathered that between 1931 and 1937, the stage was exclusively held by hereditary dancers. It was ironical that by the very next year and in the years ahead, performers from the hereditary community got completely erased from the dance stage of Music Academy except for Balasaraswati who continued to hold her sway and rose to prominence. The forebearers of the Academy drove clear to prove their point as, from then on, there appeared on the Academy’s stage dancers like Balachandra, Lakshmi Sastri, Kalanidhi and couple Gopinath and Thangamani, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Shanta Rao and Kamala

who were either most likely from the Brahmin class or rarely from other castes too. The Academy's relentless efforts came full circle when, in the consecutive years 1939 and 1940, none of the earlier dancers from devadasi community were presented except Balasaraswati (in 1938) and Kumbakonam Bhanumati (in 1940).

Sadir of the devadasis which became Bharatanatyam of the dancers of 'respectable families' had become more inclined towards satisfying the nationalist ideologue by serving to prevent the flame of indigenous culture and tradition from burning out and contributing to culturally strengthening a society struggling for independence. The polarity, about which I had mentioned earlier, between an 'unexceptionable past' and a 'declining present', was personified on the image of the new dancer and devadasi, respectively, to also define and essentialize characteristics of womanhood in support of nationalism. Writing about gender and gender identity which were framed in terms of feminism and nationalism in the Indian context, Barbara Molony (2004, 513) points out that 'Nationalism was an ideology of liberation. Women's roles were both active and symbolic in those movements, earning improved status for women and paradoxically, locking them in symbolic maternal roles. Feminism was often used in the service of nationalism'. The idea behind projecting women dancers from 'respectable families' as torch bearers of indigenous tradition was not any different from the objective of casting women as 'better mothers' in the feminization of nationalism. Srividya Natarajan's (1997, 170) take on the restoration and recasting of Sadir tends to see Music academy as having been sensitive to the needs of the devadasi. Placing Music Academy as one of the 'two major contestants who emerged as spokespersons for the art of dance in the 1920's and 30's'<sup>22</sup>, she says that Music Academy gave 'a platform for the devadasis out of a sense of the dances belonging to the devadasis'. Only a critical look at the pro-art stance of Music Academy reveals the potent viability of such options in the

face of consolidating its cultural prowess with political maneuvering that apparently outweighed addressing the genuine concerns of the devadasis and their art.

Devadasis, who were menageried on the Music Academy stage, were objectified and looked at as a kind of the 'other' who had 'crude' elements to be 'cleansed' of. They became mere pawns used on the well manipulated stage to subsequently gather and mobilize women from 'respectable families' who would project the gendered stereotypical Indian female. In short, the politics of presentation which the Music academy engaged in its formative years involved constructing devadasis as 'the Other', tuned towards canonization of the dance as 'classical'. The 'Otherness' of the devadasi was essentialized, locked in time and objectified by initiating a discourse through presenting performances of devadasis on the academy's stage and encouraging discussions revolving around her dance.

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<sup>1</sup>These events preceding devadasi abolition act are discussed in Khokar, Mohan. 1987, 41-42.

<sup>2</sup> *Maniams* were tax free land privileges

<sup>3</sup> Potukattu is the dedication ceremony of the Devadasis where they are symbolically married to the deity of a specific temple.

<sup>4</sup> The contents of the Bill as in Muthulaksmi Reddy papers (subject file no 11, part II) qtd in Anandhi S - 1991. p740

<sup>5</sup>Government of Madras, Legislative, Dept GO no 23, Jan 26, 1948: Acts, The Madras Devadasis (Prevention of Dedication) Act, 1947, Madras Act XXXI of 1947 qtd in Srinivasan, Amrit .1985, 1876

<sup>6</sup> Charter Act of 1813 opened India to missionaries

<sup>7</sup> In his famous Minute on western education in India, Lord Macaulay stated that to banish ignorance from the minds of the people and also to facilitate smooth government of the country, it was necessary to impart western education to Indians.

<sup>8</sup> Educational dispatch of Sir Charles Wood dated July19, 1854 recommended inter alia the setting up of a separate department of administration for education, establishment of universities in the three major provincial capitals, increased attention to vernacular schools, etc.

<sup>9</sup> Mentioned in Srinivasan, Amrit.1984. p47. qtd in Coorlawala, Uttara. 2004.p 51

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<sup>10</sup> Oldenberg, Veena qtd in Coorlawala, Uttara.-do-

<sup>11</sup> As indicated in Chakraborty, Pallabi.1998. p-111.

<sup>12</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddy's letter to Gandhi. Undated. Muthulakshmi Reddy papers, ibid,p 35. qtd in Anandhi S -1991. p740

<sup>13</sup> *Taikkizhavi* was the senior most female member who exercised control over domestic and money matters in the dasi household.

<sup>14</sup> Anandi.S., (1991,741), points out that Rajagopalachari, who became the chief minister of Madras presidency in 1937 showed great reluctance to place the bill before the legislative assembly and S. Satyamurthy of the Madras congress had argued against the devadasi abolition bill as he feared that non Brahmins would soon start demanding dispensing of the temple 'archakas' of the Brahmin caste.

<sup>15</sup> Muthulakshmi Reddy's letter to the editor of Tamil Nadu. 1927. Muthulakshmi Reddy papers,ibid. p 344. qtd in Anandhi S .1991. p740

<sup>16</sup> The Madras legislative council proceedings, Vol XLVI, Jan-Feb 1929, pp622.qtd in Anandhi S .1991. p 740

<sup>17</sup> Madurantakam Jagadambal is said to have trained Krishna Iyer in Sadir for 15 days for the role of Malavika in *Malavikagnimitram* staged at the Suguna Vilasa Sabha in 1925. Melatur Natesa Iyer, who is said to have trained Krishna Iyer for one and half years is mentioned to have been an expert in Bhagavata Mela Dance drama that was performed only by the Brahmin men and also Bharatanatyam. Krishna Iyer's correspondence with Sambanda Mudaliar qtd in Arudra .1997, p21-22

<sup>18</sup> Qtd in Pattabhiraman, N.1997.p 31.

<sup>19</sup> Qtd from Arudra.1986, p18-19

<sup>20</sup> Data on the dancers compiled from tabular chronology of performance at the Academy between 1931 and 1940 cited by Arudra.1986, 21 and from profiles of the dancers, Arudra. 1986, 23-28. The first performance that music academy presented was of the Kalyani daughters, P.K.Jeevarathnam and P.K.Rajalakshmi, daughters of a noted devadasi Tiruvalaputthur Kalyani and disciples of Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai in March 1931. The duo again danced in January 1933. Mylapore Gowriammal, daughter of devadasi Mylapore Doraikannu and trained by her own mother and Nelluru Munuswamy nattuvanar, was presented on January 1932. Tanjavur Balasaraswati, daughter of vocalist Jayammal and granddaughter of the famous vainika, Veena Dhanammal, was presented twice: in August 1933 and February 1934 before 1937 and many more times later. She had trained under Kandappa Pillai, Gowri Ammal and many more nattuvanars. Kumbakonam sisters, who were presented thrice in December 1933, 1934 and 1936 were Varalakshmi, Saranayaki and Bhanumathi. They were granddaughters of devadasi Kumbakonam Gowri and were trained by Papanasam Vadivelu Nattuvanar. Sabaranjitam and Nagarathnam were the other duo who performed in January 1935 and December 1935 and also in December 1936 when Sabharanjitham performed a solo. They were daughters of Nagamma and disciples of Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. The other lone devadasi who was presented in 1937 was Tirunelveli Muthurathnambal, a disciple of Chidambaram Subramaniam Nattuvanar. The last devadasi apart from T. Balasaraswati who performed at the music academy seems to be Kumbakonam Bhanumathi, one of the Kumbakonam sisters who performed in December 1940.

<sup>21</sup> Gaston, Anne Marie. 1990, p16.

<sup>22</sup> The other person mentioned to be Rukmini Devi

## Chapter-2

### **‘Refining’ the Old dance to Re-define the ‘New’ dancer: The making of Rukmini Devi’s Bharatanatyam**

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“Many newspaper people came to interview me to get public opinion with regard to this abolition, particularly among women. It was a strange surprise to them when I told them that I was against the abolition of these dances and that if the social customs of the country led to prostitution and vulgarization of the art, then such social customs should be changed while the artistes should be given support and encouragement. I was unhappy to find that they abolished the dance from temple, for it was a very important aspect of our temple worship”.

For once, this was different from what was being heard till now from both the revivalists and the reformist camps. It kind of projected an admixture of both the views. These were the words of Rukmini Devi (1971,16) recounting her thoughts on the turbulent times when the devadasi system was abolished by Madras government. This was referred to in her glowing tributes to Mylapore Gowriammal when she passed away. Gowri Amma was Rukmini Devi’s first guru in dance and later in the 1960’s had taught at Kalakshetra till her last days. Rukmini Devi’s empathy can be justified by her actions. She went a step or two ahead from what Music Academy had offered. First she gave support and succor to many traditional artists who served at different periods at her dance school and secondly, what she meant as the ‘vulgarisation’ of the art was also dealt with but in her own way and effected by the choices of her coterie. Only that, the support that she gave the nattuvanars or devadasis was not something offered in their choice. They were transplanted in a setup to give training to an entirely different class of students where infact their livelihood was being erased little by little. Rukmini Devi pointed out with remorse:

“The art very nearly died as it had become a means for remembering the body rather than of forgetting it. Yet, those whom the world denounced as



having become corrupt, gave themselves up with devotion and sincerity to the art they loved. Their art was their life and they worked and sacrificed their bodies for perfecting the art.” (1966,6)

The thrust on essentialising the devadasi dance as having had become ‘a means for remembering the body rather than of forgetting it’ meant that such a denouncement became an easy epithet in creating a recourse to Remembering to forget the body or in Forgetting to remember the body. Both ways, confrontations were meant to be avoided by replacing the devadasi’s body with a ‘spiritualised’ body which only remembered ancient myths and texts and forgot and compromised devadasi’s dance history. And this equally connoted Rukmini Devi’s belief that dance was ‘essentially spiritual’ and that only *bhakti rasa* had a place in such a spiritual art. Rukmini Devi referred to this process as ‘cleaning up and spiritualizing’<sup>1</sup> and she mentions how she went about this:

“A tradition begins when the spirit of the sastras becomes canalized into a particular form of expression. I felt I might also try to work out the spirit in my own way. I felt there was no harm in changing the accepted order a little”<sup>2</sup>

At one time she had written in an essay entitled “The world needs culture”<sup>3</sup> that

“Through art and beauty, earth will come near to heaven. When the devas descend to earth, they come with music, with colour, with light, with flowers, and with incense. We must bring to earth something of the spirit, the atmosphere, of the Devas”.

In her early writings such as this one, there is only reference to the spiritual qualities that she comprehends in the dance. There was no sense of redeeming dance from the clutches of ‘sensual’ expressions that she condemns in her later essays<sup>4</sup> nor a mention of a sense of despair at the vulnerability of the devadasi dancer and their devotion towards their art that she acknowledged in her much later writings<sup>5</sup>. I look at these as three realms in her understanding of dance or as phases in her outlook on dance which might have overlapped in the later years. In the last phase (as cited above in the first two quotes), any way, when she did reflect such a

consideration, times had changed, traditional teachers had moved out of Kalakshetra way before and it had become a haven only for Gowriammal in her failing years. What did gain attention and is important now are the earlier two phases which encapsulates *what* she did to the form and *how* she did it.

## **2.1. Rukmini Devi's early years in dance: Deconstructing History and Discourse**

Rukmini Devi's life long association with dance began rather incidentally after she met Anna Pavlova. Though she had learnt Indian music under Veena Vaidyanatha Iyer and aspired to become a musician, it was dancing and choreography that became her true calling. The period between the years 1920, when she got married to Dr Arundale and 1935, the year of her first public performance, witnessed numerous decisive influxes with regard to history and performance of Bharatanatyam and its changing contexts both regional and national.

In 1924, Rukmini Devi had seen Anna Pavlova's dance at the Covent gardens in London. She was so enraptured by the 'Pavlova magic' and fascinated by her dance that at one occasion she is said to have rushed from the Theosophical convention, which she was attending at Benares, to see Pavlova's show in Bombay. Her encounter with Pavlova continued with a chance meeting on a ship while sailing to Australia in 1928. She then learnt ballet from Cleo Nordi who was Pavlova's student. Back in India, she is said to have attempted 'renderings of Egyptian, Hungarian and South American dancers, relieved somewhat by a thoughtful presentation of Hiawatha or somewhat Pavlova like reproduction'<sup>6</sup> of the dying swan. These were performed to private audiences who consisted mostly of Indian and foreign theosophists. Initially dance was just an amateurish past time for Rukmini Devi who says, "I had no thought of taking up dancing as a professional career. At most I wished to entertain

theosophical society audiences as part of the programmes we usually organized during the annual conventions” (Ramnarayan 1984a:19).

It was after seeing the performance of Sabharanjitham and Nagarathnam on 1 Jan 1935<sup>7</sup> at the Music Academy that Rukmini Devi started learning Bharatanatyam first from Gowri Ammal and later from Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Her first performance was at the diamond Jubilee convention of theosophical society in December 1935 which she recounts as having been meant to be an “entertainment for close friends” (Ramnarayan 1984a,20). Though Meenakshisundaram Pillai objected to her performing at that very early stage of learning, she proceeded to give a show on the first occasion December 1935 theosophical convention and a full two hour show at her first public performance in March 1936 at an open air theatre at Adyar theosophical society. From accounts of Sarada (1985,2) about the December performance, it can be deduced that Rukmini Devi had included a padam- “Manchi dinamu nede” of Kshetrajna and the play ‘The Light of Asia’ produced by her in which she acted in the roles of swan and Yashodara<sup>8</sup>. Sellon’s account of the March 1936 event, mentions that it was a full two hour show consisting of items of nritya and nritya which included an Alarippu<sup>9</sup>, a song that told ‘the longing of Radha, or the delightful little-boy mischief of Shri Krishna, the beloved Divine child’<sup>10</sup>.

In any case, Meenakshisundaram Pillai’s objection to her performing at that stage of learning makes it clear to us that she had indeed not given a full-fledged recital involving all the items of the traditional repertoire. At this point of time, we can suppose that she had learnt *adavu* preliminaries and *shabdam* from Gowri ammal<sup>11</sup> and *Alarippu*, *abhinaya* numbers and other items from Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. The first public recital or *arangetram*, as has been known from the days of Madhavi in Silappadikaram, is traditionally performed when the master feels that the student is ready to perform after completing the minimum pre-requisite of learning all the items of a dance repertoire from *alarippu* to *thillana*. The

devadasi community usually preserved and followed this custom. But Rukmini Devi had wanted to give a performance which was 'not to be a formal arangetram but as part of the annual programme that she had been presenting for the entertainment of convention delegates'. This raises many questions- Why was there a rush to perform Bharatanatyam with neither having learnt the complete repertoire nor having the support from her then guru? What were the events that unfolded during this performance? And how did this event catapult new aesthetic paradigms in the already changing contexts of Bharatanatyam?

Bharatanatyam was at the threshold of gaining new contexts at the cost of losing some of its traditionally guarded content. This is a new juncture and it demands a positioning and examination of as a new stage that handled invented interjections to the history of this dance form. The dance and the dancer, as in the newly emergent non hereditary dancer, began to play vital roles in the creation of different contexts for the form that repositioned both the dance and the dancer.

Meenakshisundaram, though staunch on his refusal, was generous enough to not let Rukmini Devi down as he deputed Subbarayan, son of Chokkalingam Pillai, his nephew, to conduct the nattuvangam and another relative Narayanaswami to play the mridangam<sup>12</sup>. Matthew Allen sees the disagreement between Rukmini Devi and Meenakshisundaram Pillai, who point blankly refused to conduct her performance, as an 'inherent clash of cultures' caused by Rukmini Devi who was 'bringing an explicit agenda involving appropriation' (Allen 1997, 66). Whereas Meduri (2005b, 204) cites that Rukmini Devi gave her guru a status equivalent to 'Bharata as Adiguru of dance and drama' on her debut recital of 1935 and placed him amidst her other two symbols Natyasastra and Nataraja thus completing her three pronged 'foundational symbols of revival' and 'used them as stage props to envision a contemporary classical and traditional performance history for Bharatanatyam'. She (2005a, 11) states:

“Rukmini Devi overcame public resistance by articulating a new aesthetic for *sadir* in her debut performance, which she presented on the occasion of the Diamond Jubilee Celebrations of the Theosophical Society in 1935. The performance began with a few introductory remarks by Dr. Arundale, who underscored the importance of reviving *sadir* as *Bharatanatya*, the spiritual dance of India. The new name was prophetic in that it associated *sadir* with Bharat’s *Natyasastra*, and with *Siva/Nataraja*, the presiding deity of the *Natyasastra*. To imprint this multi disciplinary history in the imagination of the spectator, Rukmini Devi staged the dance within three large cultural symbols of god, guru and temple stage simultaneously”.

She continues with the following ‘eyewitness account of the historic recital’ thus:

“ The stage was at first in semi-darkness: on one side the musicians, including her guru, the great Shri Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, were seated on rugs with their picturesque instruments. From another side appeared a group of men chanting a most impressive Sanskrit invocation and dedication to Nataraja, the Divine lord of the Dance...after a little tuning in by the violinist, singers and drummers, the music grew stronger against the green curtains of the background, Rukmini Devi appeared in a white and gold dress, looking like some temple carving, full of arrested movement”<sup>13</sup>

The same portion as originally authored by Barbara Sellon, a theosophist on Rukmini Devi’s March 1936 performance at the Open air theatre:

“The stage at first was in semi-darkness; on one side the musicians were seated on rugs with their picturesque instruments, on the other a group of young men appeared chanting in unison a dedication of the dance recital (Bharata Natya) to Nata Raja, that aspect of divine Life, whose dancing builds the worlds and maintains them by the creative power of movement, rhythm, and vibration. The music grew stronger, the lights came on, and against the green curtains of the background, Rukmini Devi appeared. In her archaic white and gold dress, she looked like some temple carving, full of arrested movement”.<sup>14</sup>

Let us compare this with what Meduri has quoted above (account of the event as quoted). It is surprising how the first person account by Barbara Sellon (1936), also quoted in Ramnarayan (1984,21) is misquoted by

Meduri to serve the ends of her argument. A look at it makes us realize a slew of new words that prop up in her version. Addition of new ‘facts’ include- ‘*guru, the great Shri Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai*’, ‘*a most impressive Sanskrit invocation*’, ‘*lord of the Dance...*’ and ‘*after a little tuning in by the violinist, singers and drummers*’. In assessing the deviations, these are the failings: Rukmini Devi’s guru Meenakshi Sundaram mentioned here, had not been part of her first recital as has been discussed earlier, Sanskrit is mentioned as the language of invocation when there was not any language of the chant referred to in the original, Nataraja, as ‘that aspect of divine life’ was renamed as the ‘Divine lord of the dance’ and the presence of accompaniments has included violin, which in fact became an accompaniment to dance or rather, to the vocal music of Papanasam sivan when he began to sing for Rukmini Devi’s programs in 1939. Meduri’s improved interjections create a pseudo history that makes the visible invisible. With a whole new set of interventions and manipulations made to an account on a famous historic event, her attempt at creating a whole new discourse around the theory of Rukmini Devi having ‘visualised the triple reed history by using the three symbols of Nataraja, Natyasastra, and Guru theatrically in her debut recital of 1935 also becomes hugely questionable<sup>15</sup>.

This was not the very first performance given by Rukmini Devi as Meduri (2005a,12) refers to it as<sup>16</sup>. However, she is right in pointing out that Rukmini Devi articulated new aesthetic in her debut performance. But the premise (first quote of Meduri) on which she projects this argument also necessitates a relook on the following counts:

Sarada, who had witnessed this programme by Rukmini Devi, recounts that Dr. Arundale spoke on the ‘spiritual nature of this Indian dance’. She says, ‘His speeches in between the dance were equally fascinating’(1985,1). Arundale’s introduction to Rukmini Devi’s Bharatanatya in one the very early programme brochure goes like this:

“The whole world is a privileged witness to the rebirth, amidst turmoil and distress, of an age-old and already glorious India to a destiny different from any she has known before, a destiny of self-conscious participation in the life of the whole world...

Today in India she (Rukmini Devi) presents an interpretation of this splendid Indian classical Dance –Bharata-natya- a wondrous portrayal of Truth now ignobly imprisoned, but one of the great cultural forces which must be released if India’s future is to be radiant with the glorious colours of her eternal soul.”<sup>17</sup>

What is striking is that neither in this nor in the *Interpretation* in the same brochure written by Pandit .S. Subramania Sastry, is there any mention of *Sadir* or the importance of reviving it with a new name of Bharatanatya. Though Rukmini Devi and Dr. Raghavan claim to be the first to have used this name, it may be noted that *Sadir* had been renamed as Bharatanatyam before Music Academy first presented this dance in 1931, years before Rukmini Devi started learning dance. The name had already been in practice and it seems a futile probability in saying that Rukmini Devi or Dr. Arundale wanted to ‘imprint’ this history- of the naming in correlation to Bharata’s NatyaSastra and Nataraja. Moreover, Meduri brings the name of Bharata to correspond to the name of dance and more so to say how Rukmini Devi correlated it to portray her Guru as the Adi Guru<sup>18</sup> (Bharata) of Natya Sastra. It must be noted here that Rukmini Devi had sidestepped<sup>19</sup> the advice of her Guru in giving this performance which was the reason why Meenakshi Sundaram had refused to conduct the recital.

Again on Rukmini Devi’s usage of the Nataraja imagery in the recital, where Meduri balances it on the reference to Nataraja given by Sellon needs an examination. From what we understand, from the section where she has quoted from her first performance, that ‘Sanskrit’ was the Language of chant (invocation) and Nataraja as ‘Lord of Dance’, Meduri had distorted the original facts. Sellon describes Nataraja as ‘that aspect of divine Life, whose dancing builds the worlds and maintains them by the creative power of movement, rhythm, and vibration’. As it had been a

dedicatory chant, the probabilities of Sellon understanding it with reference to a translation or from enactment of the dancer are nil. It is also out of question how she would have been able to grasp what was rendered as a chant to have probably described it in her words assuming that it was sung in either tamil or telugu or Sanskrit. From her writing it can be judged that she had awareness of the nritta, nritya divisions and an idea of mythological stories and images of child Krishna and Radha from what was enacted in different items. However, her mention of Nataraja and his dance's philosophical significance on life can only be understood as her own inference from sources other than the dance or music presented there with her assumption of the chant being a dedication of Rukmini Devi's dance to the cosmic dance of Nataraja. It may well be remembered that those were the times when Ananda Coomaraswamy's international publications of *Abhinayadarpana* (1917) and the popular *Dance of Shiva-fourteen Indian essays* (1918) had held their sway within the orientalist literary circles. Both the books in their original editions had "The Cosmic Dance of Shiva (Nataraja)" as their first plate and frontispiece respectively. Anyway, creating discursive dialogues based only on one development and that too a personal account has its reservations on credibility in research. So, in ways more than one Meduri's argument is inherently flawed.

Looking more into this, Nataraja metaphor seems to have been included in Kalakshetra's agenda from a different point of time. Sarada recounts that there were times when Arundale spoke about the 'spiritual aspects of all matters on earth' and when he also spoke of 'dance as a channel for spiritual forces'<sup>20</sup>. But it was only after Rukmini Devi's return from Chidambaram temple where she had taken Radha and Leela for dedicating their dance some time between March 1937 and 1938 that Dr. Arundale gave a clarion call to use dance 'as a channel for the spiritual power of Lord Nataraja' (1985,4). Subsequently, International centre of Arts was renamed as Kalakshetra and the motif of Nataraja's dancing



image was designed to be the symbol of Kalakshetra. As Nachiappan states, it was the Chola bronze sculpture of Nataraja from Nallore (near Kumbakonam) that was adopted by Rukmini Devi, Conrad Woldring and others as emblem of Kalakshetra. He recounts how Woldring (Conrad) placed the figure of Nellore Nataraja in the centre of the flame, held by the left hand of the lord (Nachiappan and Woldring, 2001)

Let us also look at the socio-political and cultural developments during the period that have to be taken into account to answer many of the questions that arise.

Rukmini Devi's parents had turned towards teachings of Madame Blavatsky and Col.Olcott founders of theosophical society in India<sup>21</sup> and it was but natural that Rukmini Devi also became inclined towards their teachings and grew up under the influence of Dr. Annie Besant though she personally met Dr. Besant only at the age of 14. It is evident through Rukmini Devi's writings (2001a,5) that she believed in occult happenings associated with religion and had held high regard for Indian indigenous sciences of astrology, ayurveda, power of mantras or the messages of sages even in her early years. As it so happened in the case of English orientalist<sup>22</sup> who were credited with helping Indians 'rediscover' their pasts through their translation of ancient Indian texts to English, a century later, theosophists like Madame Blavatsky and Annie Besant also basked in the same glory. They were seen as 'messengers' who declared Indian 'ancient truths' and 'revealed to India and to Indians the true message of the great ones, the rishis and the saints and others through their discourses on Geeta, Upanishads etc. There was always a fervent yearning for an 'ancient India' and its nostalgia which she imagined to be the life in Indian villages and which she considered as 'real India'. For her the image of people chanting mantras and singing thevarams on their way back from a bath in the river, simple but exquisitely crafted kitchen vessels, a life surrounded by music, religion and devotion seemed to lend a utopian charm. It led to a belief that 'everything in life was beautiful and

picturesque' in the old Indian homes. She even considered politics during the pre-independence as being having been a 'spiritual activity' where 'character and right example were more important than the positions they occupied'. The romantic idealistic vision suspended any qualms about genuine realities or its inherent ambiguities. Such beliefs did not in least ruffle the placid calmness that clung to a rosy childishness but only increased the effort to translate this nostalgia into a vision of the future. Elaborating on a futuristic vision for Kalakshetra, Rukmini Devi says, 'someday I hope to have a village where artists along many lines may live'. She intended to bring in 'the spirit of the Indian village' where dancers musicians, poets and scholars lived in proximity and developed their own crafts. In such an endeavour only thing which lost its meaning was the reality of the present and the weight of the contexts of the past. Any traditional creative artist of that time would have felt tempted about the possibility of living and working in such environs. Only that, the vision was again fantastic and seemed to place the artists in an ivory tower. Weighed down by the 'then and now' dialogues which I had earlier mentioned with regard to Madras Music Academy only increased in frequency<sup>23</sup> in the case of Rukmini Devi. On an occasion where she recounts her first experience of witnessing a dance performance, Rukmini Devi (2001a,7) says,

The "dancers opened my eyes to the inherent spirituality of the Indian dance. Though there were some elements that were jarring to me, I saw through all that a great art submerged partly in ignorance and vulgarity though the devotional character and the technique of the dance were inspiring. This was a great moment and I saw how the gold can be separated from the dross. Thus began an unexpected mission in my life. But the background and knowledge I had of many contacts all over the world led me to learn Indian dance and to give all the art a great place in the India of the future and the message India has to give to the world regarding the meaning of true art."

It was a 'mission' that was clearly spelt out and argued upon for staging the 'meaning of true art' as the 'message India has to give to the world' and offer Indian dance a great place in the India of the future'.

Chandrashekar (1983) reminiscing of the time before the starting of Kalakshetra, mentions that Rukmini Devi discussed of a 'necessity for an Art-Centre where some of the arts, especially music and dance, could thrive with very correct standards and under beneficial guidance'. The 'correct standards' was accordingly set by Rukmini Devi to make 'Bharatanayam respectable' by 'eliminating the erotic from it' and stressing the spiritual content of the dance form. The 'beneficial guidance' was rendered initially with the help of traditional nattuvanars till Kalakshetra trained students took over the mantle of becoming teachers and completely replaced the hereditary nattuvanars.

In the sphere of theosophical society's ventures, its esoteric arm headed by Annie Besant, in 1925, had proclaimed to the world that a 'young twenty one year old Rukmini Devi was 'Rishi Agastya's messenger to the women and young ones in India.' She was hailed as one with a 'glorious past' who will be 'welcome in the higher world'<sup>24</sup> Rukmini Devi, thus prefixed with a halo of a glorified lineage on a global platform, was ordained to stride a path treaded by the rishis of ancient India and chalked out to lead women and young. As a fore-runner to this role, she was made the first president of a new All India Federation of Young Theosophists in 1923 and the president of the World Federation of Young Theosophists in 1925. In 1928 the so-called *World Mother Project* was put in motion, headed by Rukmini in which Annie Besant declared that Rukmini Devi would serve as "the resuscitator of all that is best in India's traditional art and culture and dedicate them to the World Mother who represents the feminine aide of Divinity and ideal womanhood." (Kothari 2003,12). The Indian and international press had dubbed it as "Mrs. Besant's New Fad", and it was to be short-lived.<sup>25</sup> But Rukmini Devi and her theosophical entourage continued to project and live upon the ideals proclaimed hence forth in the realm of dance and culture.

At the regional level, from the year 1927 when Music Academy was first formed as a spin-off of the Madras session of Indian congress, it had engaged itself in a 'cultural renaissance' along the lines of nationalist ideals. From 1931 onwards, Music academy started presenting dance performances by traditional dancers from devadasi community. By 1932, *Sadir* had been renamed Bharatanatyam in its sixth music conference and from then on, the academy had held steadfast to its agenda of bringing 'respectable people' into its fold both as learners and audience of this dance form<sup>26</sup>. Rukmini Devi had been one among the 'respectable audience' who witnessed performances of the Kalyani daughters, Balasaraswati, Kumbakonam sisters and many other dancers from devadasi families. As Rukmini Devi had started her training in Bharatanatyam in 1935, she felt that time was now ripe for 'respectable' woman like her for taking up the mantle and leading the dance to the pedestal. Music academy was focusing itself on projecting only dancers from devadasi community during these years and moreover dancers who performed there followed the traditional method of *Sadir cutcheri* dancing an entire repertoire that started in the evening and mostly lasted till very late hours. Compared to them, Rukmini Devi had not completed her basic training yet. But the urge to live upto the ideals of *World Mother's* movement and 'resuscitate' the Indian traditional art and culture seemed to have strongly weighed on her. By beginning to take lessons in Bharatanatyam, she believed she had started her mission in cultural renaissance of the country and now felt that there was not a better occasion for her to perform or a better audience than the diamond jubilee celebrations of Theosophical society convention that was to happen at Adyar that year in 1935. It was this opportunity that appealed and appeared all the more stronger for her to perform and prove her mettle. At this point, the notions of transgressing the tradition of a first recital and performing against her guru's advice did not appear important to her.

What were the immediate outcomes of these important performances and how did it extend itself into translating and altering the traditional hereditary aesthetics? First, she was successful in side-stepping the regard for traditional sanctity that the professional community associated with their training methodology that held the belief that only after a particular period training would a student be eligible to give the first public performance – *Arangetram*, which also meant the beginning of a performance career for the artist. It was the calculative connivance of opportunity- right moment and right venue, chosen to ensure self-projectionist propaganda through performance. Secondly, she transplanted the contents, concepts and contexts embodied in a living dance tradition of *Sadir* personified in the professional devadasi to mix-n-match with the ideals and concepts that she valued and presented it to be legitimized at an alternate time and space. I illustrate upon the second point in the following discussion. For this, let us shift our focus to Rukmini Devi's debut performance.

## **2.2. Constructing the 'Exotic': Customizing the Dance**

The setting and ambience of the performance space as recounted by Barbara Sellon (1936) evokes a sense of exoticism that the event created. The audience who were seated under a giant rain-tree was dressed in white and so was the performer Rukmini Devi who was in her 'archaic white and gold dress'. It was customary for the theosophists to dress in white, a practice that pointed to theosophical society's base in esoteric Christology. So, Rukmini Devi too would have chosen to wear white either with a sense of reflecting the same ideals of her fellow theosophists or with a sense of representing the principles of *World mother* who was the embodiment of Virgin Mary and where color white corresponded to representing virginity. It might have well meant an attempt to re-establish the remnants of the earlier movement when Rukmini Devi was the chosen one to be World Mother's "vehicle" that had rather fizzled out

too soon. Otherwise, women in Tamil Nadu had their reservations against wearing white or black as they were meant to be worn only at inauspicious occasions. Even now at Kalakshetra, Chennai, when students are discouraged from wearing white or off-white bordered dance practice sarees, a senior teacher like late Vijalakshmi Krishnaswamy or even younger teachers like Ganga Thampi would twitch their noses in disapproval<sup>27</sup>. However, at an alternate space and occasion where the audience consisting of both foreigners and Indians were together for a similar cause of espousing 'theosophy', such significances and meanings also were altered. To Sellon, Rukmini Devi's dance reminds her of the image of 'a priest at the altar'. This shows how the usage of such a color scheme for a bharatanatyam costume was affected with the intention to form significant associations that made it symbolically identical to the archaic costume worn by a catholic priest when he was officiating at the altar. It was thus generously meant to re-inscribe in the dance and to prudently show and invoke in the audience, similar feelings of piety, honor, grace and atonement meant, be it of Virgin Mary or of an officiating priest.

The color of the costume apart, its design differed significantly from what was worn by Rukmini Devi's contemporaries. Let us look at some of the comments on Rukmini Devi's costume and appearance on the debut recital. Sellon comments that Rukmini Devi 'looked like some temple carving full of arrested movement' that 'sprang in to life' as the volume of the music increased. On the same lines are the observations of Sarada (1985, 2) to whom Rukmini Devi appeared 'like a temple-statue come to life' in a costume that 'resembled the garment etched in the sculptures of dancers in our temples'. For Hoffman, (1986, 18) Rukmini Devi was a 'damsel come alive from one of the ancient Indian sculptures' who 'looked like a devi and danced so beautifully. It was difficult to believe that she was not a goddess'. In all these comments, there is an allegoric link made

with 'temple sculpture' and Rukmini Devi's costume and with 'sculpture coming to life' and Rukmini Devi's dance.

Rukmini Devi reasons on the changes made to her costume. She says, 'one of the most important changes that I wanted to bring about was in *Aharya abhinaya* or in the dance costumes', 'it was not easy to design a new costume. I had to try to make something new-not with the idea of making it look new but with the idea of making it look old. In other words, create costumes that were in the spirit of what our people were thousands of years ago. This was not very easy. It was not easy to get help from the sculptures because they are clothed only below the waist! Therefore we had to think creatively in order to catch only below the waist! Therefore we had to think creatively in order to catch the old spirit.' (1958, 52). An Italian seamstress, Ms. Cazin, is said to have helped her in creating the costume. Here, 'creativity' was employed in making a relic- a costume that will look old and the wearer, 'ancient'. It was attributing of an imagined ancient history to counter and prevail upon a persisting contemporary usage. Changes in Bharatanatyam costume were, according to her, part of her 'reforms that had to be made in the dance of those days and of the impurities that had to be removed' (1985, 19). And what were these 'impurities that had to be removed'? She says, 'the saris, for example- were very cheap tinsely stuff that did not match the dance and were according to me too showy. The pyjamas that were worn, the Victorian type of cholis- they all seemed to me to be a mixture of many different civilizations'. To Rukmini Devi, the sarees devadasis wore appeared cheap, glittery, in other words, fanciful and it did not have the worthiness to clothe the 'classical Bharatanatyam' which to her was spiritual and closer to the Gods. The spiritual dance of the Gods had to be clothed in the costly silks that were used to adorn the Gods in the temples. Moreover, she herself was used to wearing silk often and so, she chose only silks for her costumes. The pyjamas that devadasis wore were usually of a different material or was a separate entity from the saree used only to cover the

remaining visible part of their legs left uncovered by the saree. Rukmini Devi made pyjamas with the same silk embellished with borders and zari work similar to the dancing sculptures of temples. When Rukmini Devi felt her preference for usage of silk for the dance costume, neither did she understand it as her own personal choice to exercise a subjective vision nor was she sensitive enough to understand the contextual exigencies where silk was considered costly by most of the devadasis. Instead, she generalized it to make it part of the reforming agenda where she regarded herself as a person entitled to remove the ‘impurities’-impurities of the costume and impurities to the dance caused by wearing of such costume.



**Fig: 1**

**Balasaraswati**

For an idea of the costume worn by Rukmini Devi’s contemporary like Balasaraswati or other dancers from devadasi communities we can find reference in the following: On one instance Balasaraswati, recalls how as a child she used to dress up like Gowri Amma in a *jenti* or *thuya* sari and try to dance like her. A *jenti* or *thuya* sari, she said, was popular among dancers because it wasn’t expensive as it was usually white organdy



threaded with gold or silver.<sup>28</sup> Similarly in an account of Balasaraswati's performance which describes her costume, De Zoete (1953,185) says, 'Balasaraswati, without make-up, without flowers, and with no ornaments but nose-ring and earrings, stood on the stage waiting with arms akimbo a beautiful and at the same time almost negligent figure in a black bodice and a bright yellow saree with a black border of the kind called "temple-border" wound tightly round her body and between her legs, over red pyjamas... She is simplicity itself.' It is not known if the material of the costume was silk or organdy or simple cotton but it is clear that the saree was tied around in a particular style and not ready-made or stitched as a ready to wear. This way of wearing saree as a *kacha* or in a normal method of tying but reduced to knee length with pyjama underneath was what Balasaraswati followed at most of her performances. Let us try a comparison of the costume worn by Rukmini Devi and devadasi dancers of the same period.



**Fig: 2**

**Devadasi dancers of 1930's (from Katherine Mayo's 'The Face of Mother India, 1935.)**



**Fig: 3 & 4**  
**Rukmini Devi**

The first thing that strikes us is that Rukmini Devi's costume is well ironed which helps to highlight a) the gathering and fall of the pleats that prominently display the structure of the garment worn. b) a neat outline of the figure of the dancer.

The other important factors of difference being the

2. Shorter neck to arm length of the blouse and exclusion of pallu in Rukmini Devi's earlier costumes
3. Texture and material of the costume and degree of intricacies of *zari* work in the *pallu* and border of the saree

The first factor of a well-ironed costume invariably depended upon the viability of such an option considering the level of economic backwardness in the devadasi community since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Moreover, the idea of maintaining dress etiquette to make an impression was more of a British custom which was adopted by the upper class Indians which Rukmini Devi undeniably conformed to.

The length of the arm of the blouse that extends from just below the neck reaches till almost the elbow in the case of devadasis. In Rukmini Devi's

costume, it is not as close to the neck and the length of the arm too is short extending only half way above the elbow. This length may have been shortened to show the *Vanki* or armlet that Rukmini Devi used to wear or it might have been a change in the fashion trend that she adopted. Instead of the pallu that the devadasis used to cover their chest with,



**Fig:5. Rukmini Devi**

Rukmini Devi improvised it with the usage of a cloth tied from the back of the torso and gathered up over the blouse to cover the breasts and let fall as a pleated fan. The outline of the torso became prominently visible in such a styling. On the lower body was worn a pleated stitched pyjama with a *visiri (fan)* showing the grand zari of the *mundaani*<sup>29</sup> that was sewn on the sides of the pyjama covering the space between the legs. Another cloth was extended to cover the back seat portion and its two ends were again pleated or pinned to the pyjama at the front. This kind of pyjamas with a front pleat and back seat gave an enhanced silhouette of

the hips and the waist. The devadasis used the *mundaani* just as an extension of their pallu drawn around their waist to hang it along the centre of their saree tied as a skirt to reach just above the ankle. The heightened emphasis on the figure of the dancer noticeable in the costume of Rukmini Devi was absent in the case of devadasis and so was the heavy brocade of zari work. This being the reason why Rukmini Devi's costume and dance found a ready reference to temple sculptures where the carve and etch of the body contours were emphasized. It can also be sensed that this kind of emphasis on the figure was an influence from the ballet aesthetics where it was essential for their dresses to reveal their body line and highlight the extensions of their limbs and its moves on a normally huge proscenium stage. Moreover, Rukmini Devi being a lone dancer in her territory and a *prima donna* of her dance, had the privilege of exercising her choices which in any case a devadasi couldn't have been able to do as theirs was a dance of a community where they followed a common style of costuming. Even usage of safety pins, stitching or pressing their costumes were probably a luxury for the devadasis which they couldn't afford to or were not aware about as these were modern incursions on the Indian fashion scene.

Sarada (1985,44) recalls that Rukmini Devi used to 'change costumes twice during a dance recital to lend colour to the performance'.

Balasaraswati hit out against such a trend as she was of the opinion that the 'concerted effect of the experience of dancing, which needs mental concentration, is spoilt by frequent changes of costume' And 'when the continuity of the dance is interrupted by costume changes, announcements and explanations, the congealing of inner feeling becomes impossible and concentration is shattered.'(1984,12) There was no doubt that the finery of Rukmini Devi's Bharatanatyam costume with exquisite colors, the silks and the jewellery generated comments that equalled her to many ethereal characters like apsara or goddess come down to earth. It was Balasarawati's turn now to wield the hatchet on Rukmini Devi's 'sringara'

argument<sup>30</sup>. She criticized that ‘when so much importance is attached to the looks of the dancer it is but natural that dancing is considered carnal and shringara vulgar’. Moreover, an issue of distinctness was created between a dancer when she was on-stage and off-stage. When, in the case of devadasis, there was not much difference between the costume and daily wear, the new kind of costume that Rukmini Devi especially made for dance that highlighted the structural features of the body, created distinctness between the way saree was worn as a daily wear and as a stage costume. It thereby decided a role play for the dancer demarcating the professional propensities of the persona during the performance from the otherwise day to day life.

In the area of musical accompaniments for dance, Rukmini Devi (1958, 52) refers to the usage of harmonium and clarionet used in the early days. Out of these, she says that she felt that clarionet ‘was not appropriate’. She tried using mukhaveena as she felt that it ‘seemed to go very well with the temple atmosphere’ but ‘it is difficult to play, and so we use the flute’. Another contemporary, Narayana Menon (1963,18), who was a connoisseur of arts but an administrator and diplomat had this to say: “Reform was certainly necessary not only in the social attitude to the dance, but in the practice and presentation of the art itself. Public performances of Bharatanatyam in the early years of this century were somewhat crude. Recitals often lasted the whole night. The music was hardly ever of good quality. Bagpipes! were the order of the day for drones. Three or four male singers dressed in green and red turbans stood on one corner of the platform, the drummer often standing behind the dancer and walking up and down the stage. The nattuvanar and the musicians began to sit on the platform and they dressed soberly. The bagpipe gave place to the tanpura”.

Balasaraswati recalls that the music accompanying dance performances used to be different early in this century. ‘Mukhaveena, a diminutive

nagaswaram, was the main instrument which was later replaced by the clarionet which had a sweeter tone.' Similarly, she says that *tutti*, a bagpipe like instrument was used to indicate pitch for the musicians. The bells for the anklets (of the dancers) had to be in tune with the pitch of the *tutti*, that was the criterion for their selection.(Pattabhiraman 1984, 41)

Here we see three different views expressed by three different people on the musical instruments used for dance. The changes perceptible in the use and disuse of some traditional instruments, though it cannot be generalized as it is limited to sources mentioned here, were due to the following reasons.

The issue of personal preferences brought by dancers from non-traditional communities like Rukmini Devi who, for example, preferred mukhavina to clarionet as she felt it created a temple ambience which complemented her temple-stage aesthetics. The views showing personal distaste and prejudice against certain instruments and traditional way of presentation that were written about and propagated by cultural diplomats like, for example, Narayana Menon, who held positions of power in the cultural sphere and hence felt they had power to make influential judgements. In this case, *tutti* which was only a bagpipe-like instrument was a very important instrument according to Balasaraswati, a dancer from traditional community. But according to Narayana Menon who perhaps was more concerned about the look of Indianness of the instrument when it was presented on a national platform, seemed satisfied when he says it is replaced by *tanpura*. Bagpipes had an important place in the British band music and it would be no surprise if it had been part of the Indian military bands too.<sup>31</sup> But, it is not known if *tutti* was an indianised version of it or was originally an Indian instrument which was just similar to bagpipe. Whatever the case, it had been adapted to suit the needs of a dancer and that role was being altered because of the aesthetic conventions created to suit and support the ideologies of a dominant few.

Continuing on the 'reforms' that she had made, Rukmini Devi (1985,18) says, 'Over and above all these, there were reforms to be made as far as the actual staging was concerned. There was complete ignorance of the stage as such and the musical accompaniment was deplorable. In those days, Nattuvanars sang in a high sruti intended for feminine voices and this produced a very harsh effect.' She adds, 'very often there was the general idea that if the musical accompaniment was sung in a high pitch, a high sruti, the music could be heard very far away. This I know is true for the Nagaswaram, but I thought that for the dance there should be good music according to proper sruti'. Similar views about Rukmini Devi have been voiced by Ramnarayan (1984a,28). She says that Rukmini Devi 'introduced a new type of singing which intensified the impact of the whole. She instilled a new musical awareness in her solo recitals as well as her productions' though Ramnarayan does not illustrate or specify on how the 'new' was different from the old. Sankara Menon, who was a theosophist and had been associated with Rukmini Devi and Kalakshetra since its formative years says that 'when Rukmini Devi took up dancing, the standard of music at dance recitals had deteriorated. The nattuvanars had excellent knowledge of tala but they would take the tala wherever they liked, saying: Who is there to question us? Except in the case of Balasaraswati whose abhinaya was supremely musical there was no musical sense in the dancers of the time..... And what she (Rukmini Devi) did, others have tried to copy since.'<sup>32</sup> Sankara Menon was no different from his brother Narayana Menon in giving such highly opinionated views. According to him, both the standard of music and talas before Rukmini Devi reformed it was one which presented a poor picture. Only Balasaraswati was spared the attack as her dance was there for everyone to see and she had continued her dancing career which other dancers from devadasi families unfortunately could not pursue. The premise of the 'new', be it in costume, stage setting, accompanying instruments, vocal support, items of the repertoire or any other aspect altered by Rukmini Devi always seemed to gain its sustenance from accusations of crudeness/

improperness/ deterioration/ inadequacies on the 'old' represented in the devadasi. It was not a symbiotic relationship that thrived between the 'new' and the 'old' but a parasitic one on public platforms.

Let us go back to the argument on the pitch nattuvarars sang in. Consider the pitch which is used by singers of Bhagavatha mela Natakam, a parallel tradition from the same state or the Kathakali musicians of the neighbouring state of Kerala. Both of them sing in a pitch which is different from the normal sruti used by men in *cutcheri paddhati* (vocal concert tradition). Both are traditions that followed and still follow night long performances similar to that followed by Sadir before the 'renaissance' and 'reformation' activities. Though, in these days, the traditional singers of Bhagavad mela natakam too are being replaced by musicians trained in the *cutcheri* pattern, in this art form, music gave emphasis to dance, in other words, the intricacies and dexterity of extrapolation in music was absent and there was very little or no emphasis made on showing the technical brilliance of the song. It is perhaps due to this reason why singing in higher pitch did not pose any problem for the musician and it also gave a lateral scope for the voice modulation used in the singing of lyrics intermittently interspersed with *vachakas* or dialogues of characters and vice-versa. In the case of Kathakali too a particular pattern of modulated singing was practiced in high pitch. This followed sopana sangeetam used in the temples which was different from vocal rendition followed in *cutcheris*. Moreover, the high pitch that the nadaswaram played in the temples as *peria melam* will have resounded invariably in the *Chinna melam* too that was *Sadir cutcheri*. So, it can be deduced that, every dance had its own kind of vocal music which differed from the vocal concert or *cutcheri* music tradition that was a separate genre of specialization. As there is no evidence of the singing that was prevalent in the practice of Sadir during olden times, only suppositions can be made against the available evidences and amongst claims and counter claims.



Now, what were the effects of reducing the pitch or why was it reduced after all, which Rukmini Devi claimed to have done.

1. Rukmini Devi wanted kritis of Tyagaraja, Muthuswami dikshitar and Shyama Sastri to be composed in dance. Meenakshisundaram Pillai had first composed Dikshitar's *Ananda natana prakaasam* for Rukmini Devi though composing dance for kritis was alien to the Sadir tradition<sup>33</sup>. Singing of such kritis, which were inbuilt with elements of technical finesse exhibited in a vocal concert, called for a different level of expertise from the nattuvanars. Moreover the possibilities of singing kritis in high pitch might have posed problems for the nattuvanars as it was difficult for Tyagaraja's or Muthuswami Dikshitar's kritis to be sung in high pitch. Rukmini Devi was particular about kritis and in 1939 with the coming of Papanasam sivan, a carnatic composer and vocalist to Kalakshetra, the music lent for dance completely imbibed the style of carnatic vocal *cutcheri* rendition.
2. This in turn led instruments such as violin and flute which had normal range of sruti and used mainly in vocal concerts to be adopted as accompanying instruments for dance<sup>34</sup>.
3. And so, instruments like Mukhaveena, which had limited range of only an octave and a half usually played at the high pitch of five, went into disuse.

Similarly, Rukmini Devi is credited with seating the musicians on the left side of the stage or on the right hand side of the dancer. Sarada (1985,2) recounts that in the dance concerts that she had seen in Tanjore, the accompanists used to stand behind a bench at the back of the stage and the nattuvanar stood near the dancer. She adds that 'in their enthusiasm they even used to come forward along with the dancer playing the cymbals with their hands showing rhythmic pattern of the nrittam. For the first

time in the history of dance concerts, I found that the accompanists were seated at the right front corner of the stage with a dark back-curtain which contrasted with the splendid colourfully costumed dancer.’ Against the backdrop of a proscenium stage, Rukmini Devi shifted the placement of the musicians to the right so that moves and actions of the solo dancer were projected more succinctly against a stable and dark background. Balasaraswati (Pattabhiraman1984,40) reasons that in olden days, as the audience were positioned on all sides of the performer and there was no power amplification, the nattuvanar and the musicians had to move back and forth along with the dancer so that the song and rhythm could be heard by the dancer.’

There are other factors too that can be considered as probable reasons for this development.

First of all, Rukmini Devi gave emphasis to extension of limbs and the finish of the movements, an influence from her earlier training in ballet. Such an execution needed more space unlike devadasis who were used to performing within a limited space assigned in the temple environs and who did not give importance to maximizing the extension of the body. Rukmini Devi must have felt the need for the proscenium to be the dancer’s arena very much like the ballet which followed a similar practice. She also complains on the duration of Sadir cutcheri that she says used to take four or five hours. The recital that used to start late in the night and sometimes finish in the early mornings, was ‘too much for modern times’ due to which she says she had to shorten the dance programme to keep it within two or two and half hour limit<sup>35</sup>. A varnam which was said to last from two to three hours or Thillanas that were equally long did not mean that it had more number of jathis or lyrics for abhinaya. The musical structure remained the same but in dance, it was altered. For example, the repetitions of each line depicting *pada-padartha* abhinaya were reduced, so were its improvisation or *sanchari bhava*. In the case of *thillana*, the emphasis on *mei* adavus and other elaborations was

subsequently reduced. The decrease in the number of repetitions of a lyric, for example in an abhinaya item, meant that the scope of artistic creativity for elaborating on bhavas and abhinaya which was developed on the basis of the individual skill of the dancer dropped considerably. When the duration of the items was reduced, it also meant that the time lag between the sequence say -one *abhinaya* and another *abhinaya* or one *jati* and another *jati* or one *jati* and the next *abhinaya*, became lesser and lesser. Items became compacted retaining only the essence. Both the dancer and musicians became stressed out within a short span of performance time that was vastly different from the earlier eased out way of presentation. This would have exacted a tremendous effort from the part of the mridangam accompanist to stand and perform wearing his instrument even if the duration of the programme was reduced. Same was the case with nattuvanar who had to utter *jati-s* more frequently or within reduced time intervals. Moreover they were not within the precincts of a temple where they felt obliged to stand and perform either before the deity or when moving around in procession. That's how it might have become the best option to sit and perform. For a dancer, all this meant an additional test on her stamina and not on her creativity of improvisation that resulted in a formulaic repetition of the same nritya and abhinaya in every performance which, nevertheless, would have only created redundancy of expressions.

Rukmini Devi gave more importance to bhakti oriented themes sans srngara in items like kritis of Tyagaraja or Dhikshitar, which had intermittent korvais for its swara passages. The frequency of items that had nritya increased and the duration of bhava oriented items decreased. This too would have been a further strain on the percussionist and nattuvanar. Another move that required the creation of a separate sitting space for the musicians was the introduction of vocalists specialized in cutcheri music who replaced the nattuvanar singers in rendering songs for dance. Vocalists were used to sitting and singing for cutcheris and so

required a similar setup here too. This change from the traditional way of engaging nattuvanars for singing to having accomplished concert musicians as vocalists was a well studied move by Rukmini Devi . She reveals ‘when I asked musicians to sing for me, they would simply say that it was much below their dignity’. It is perfectly understandable why the musicians she had approached and their music had in fact nothing to do with Sadir. They were professionally specialized in their genre of *cutcheri* sampradaya. Both Sadir music and Carnatic music had developed from a same base but as Lakshmi Subrahmaniam (1993,25) notes ‘by the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Carnatic music had developed a separate sophisticated, self-sustaining identity divorced from classical dance’. They were different in many ways for example in the items sung and even the modal pitch of rendering and almost all the items performed in the first half of a Bharatanatyam recital vis-à-vis alarippu, jathiswaram, sabdam and varnam were compositions of nattuvanars and the items done in the second half were songs of composers who excelled in *pada kavitha*.

### **2.3. Solo repertoire: Omissions and Additions**

The concert style solo repertoire of Sadir as formatted by Tanjore Quartette in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was largely performed in the following order:

Alarippu

Jathiswaram

Sabdam

Varnam

Padam

Javali

Thillana.

Sloka

The Quartette fashioned the repertoire in such a way that it gave a balanced emphasis to both *nritha* and *abhinaya*. *Alarippu*, *Jathiswaram*

and *Thillana* had more to do with exhibiting formal aspects like *saushtava*, sense of *tala* and *laya* of the dance. But it is the items with more *sahitya*, like the *Padam* and *javali* that were reflective of the times. The items of *abhinaya* were ably supplemented by texts from more contemporary poets. Balasaraswati (1984,8), from hereditary *devadasi* family and a contemporary of Rukmini Devi Arundale, considered the traditional format of Bharatanatyam recital viz, *Alarippu*, *Jathiswaram*, *sabdam*, *varnam*, *padams*, *thillana* and the *sloka* as ‘the correct sequence in the practice of this art, which is an artistic yoga, for revealing the spiritual through the corporeal’. She drew analogy of Bharatanatyam recital to a great temple where the devotee enters to have a *darshan* of the deity. The format of the repertoire from *alarippu* concluding in a *thillana* or *sloka* is what made up the *Sadir cutcheri* or concert pattern. The items from this format were usually performed at occasions like temple festivals (*naimittikarcana*- festival worship) or in the palace of the king on special days or whenever he held a royal court. In the daily ritual worship (*nityarcana*) inside the sanctum where *devadasi* was involved in performing the *camara* (fly-whisk), offering *kumbha-dipa* (pot-lamp) in front of the deity, only reciting *pushpanjali* sloka with dancing of *pushpanjali* and *mangalam* and a devotional number like *padam* would be sung and danced by her during the daily small scale procession at dusk (*nityotsava*) before retiring the deity to bed with a lullaby. *Naimitticarcana* rituals which were conducted for a stipulated number of days again included performance of dances like *kolattam* on certain days and *varnams* and *padams* or *javalis* on certain days<sup>36</sup>. So, it can be understood that following the order of items in the repertoire did not have ritualistic connotations though some of the items like *padams* or other devotional numbers were included in the *nityarcana* and *varnams* and *padams* or *javalis* were included from the *sadir* repertoire in *naimitticarcana*. Following of the order of performance from *alarippu* to *sloka* can be best explained as a performance methodology evolved to embody the demands of the conscientious persona of the dancer and a

cognizant audience. This is evident as the fact that composers of alarippu, jathiswaram, sabdam and varnam were all nattuvanars who embodied in these items, the primary concern of giving substantial focus to building the art aesthetics of dance and evolving technical finesse. Padams and javalis or viruttam on the other hand were compositions of contemporary poets where the dancer could focus on aesthetics of abhinaya which also served the purpose of conveying the essence of bhakti.

From evidence gathered on the different periods when Rukmini Devi danced solo during her early years of performing Bharata Natyam, following are the findings. Her first performance, as is famously known, was at the diamond jubilee International theosophical convention in December 1935. After this she performed again, on March 15<sup>th</sup> 1936 at Adyar<sup>37</sup> and on April 10<sup>th</sup> the same year at Museum Theatre, Egmore<sup>38</sup>. By August 1939, Papanasam Sivan had joined Kalakshetra<sup>39</sup> and by the end of the same year, he had started singing for her performances<sup>40</sup>. She is then said to have gone on an extended tour of Southern India in 1939 starting from Chidambaram where she performed a dedicatory dance before the shrine of Lord Nataraja.<sup>41</sup>

One of the oldest programme brochures of Rukmini Devi<sup>42</sup> available gives details of the music accompanists, the items performed with its meanings but it does not mention the place or date of performance. The brochure mentions director of studies as Pandit Subramanya Sastri, who was the grandfather of Peria Sarada (he passed away in the year 1941). And also does not mention the name of Papanasam Sivan, who joined Kalakshetra in the year 1939. Sarada and her grandparents had come to Adyar in February 1937 and it was Subramanya sastri who had suggested the name 'Kalakshetra' to Rukmini Devi which was till then known by the name 'The International centre for Arts'. The brochure mentions the institute's name as Kalakshetra. So this particular performance could have been performed only after February, 1937. The period of performance

can thus be narrowed down to have happened after February 1937 and before 1939 by when Papanasam Sivan had joined Kalakshetra and started lending support in singing for dance.

The musicians who gave support for this program were:

Nattuvanar- P. Chokkalingam Pillai of Pandanallur;

Singers- T.S. Balasubrahmanya Pillai of Tanjore

K.N. Dandayudapani Pillai of Karaikkal

Flute- T.P.Sivasankaran Pillai of Trivandrum

Mridangam- M. Krishnamurti Pillai of Tirutturaipundi

Let us look at the items performed in order.

1. Alarippu- Tryasra- jati, Ekatala
2. a. Viruttam- “Viritta senjadayaada vadanachandiranaada ...” –  
Ananda Bhairavi  
b. Dikshita’s Kirtana- “Aananda natana prakaasham...” Kedaram,  
Misra-jati, Ekatala
3. Jati-svaram- Ragamalika, Misra-jati, Ekatala (By Smt. S. Radha and Smt. G. Leelavati, both pupils of The International Academy of the Arts, taught by K. Muttukumara Pillai of Kattumannar Koil)
4. Jayadeva’s Gita-govinda (Sloka and verses) “Rase harimiha vihita vilaasam...”- Hanuma-todi, Aditala
5. Sati-svayamvara- Abhinaya (Rukmini Devi is said to have been studying Kathakali and in this item, she has adapted certain aspects of that art to her own way of dancing. This item has been studied with A. Krishnan Nair)
6. Kshetrajna’s Pada- “Ninnu zuda galigenu” Pumnagavarali,  
Tryasra-jati, Triputatala
7. Ramayana-kirtana- “Aaro enrennaamale”, Dhira-samkarabharana,  
Aditala
8. Gopala-krishna Bharati’s kirtana- “Varugalaamo aiyya” in Manji,  
Misra-jati Ekatala.

9. Gopala-krishna Bharati's kirtana- "Natanam adinar" in Vasanta.

Khanda-jati Atatala

Mangalam

There are many deviations from the usual mode of presentation of a traditional repertoire. Between alarippu and jathiswaram which usually follow one another, there are two abhinaya items performed here. And after jathiswaram again there are four purely abhinaya items and two kirtanams in which it is not known if nritta were performed. So, sabdam, varnam, javali and thillana are the items that were not performed. There are two basic conclusions that can be formed out of this. First being that Rukmini Devi had not yet completed learning all the items of the repertoire in which case it can be stated that she had a decisive hand in learning the items of her choice from the master. A traditional nattuvanar who will usually insist on completing the learning of all the important items like varnam and thillana before proceeding to give a public recital and moreover, will not have taught such a lot of items based more on abhinaya before teaching *varnam* as is the usual custom. Secondly, if she had completed learning all the important items from her master, even then she can be said to have exercised her priorities in the presenting items of her interest as it did not have an equal balance of nritta and abhinaya items nor did it follow the sequence of traditional performance order. Both ways it was she who decided what the recital consisted of.

A look at her choice of items and the meaning of the compositions taken up for performance reveals the following:

The viruttam is more on the roopa varnana of Siva- Nataraja of Chidambaram and the wish of the devotee to see a vision of Siva. The Dikshitar Kirtana, 'Ananda natana prakaasam', again on Siva, describes him as a dancer of Ananda tandava and the bhakta's plea towards seeking solace in him. The next abhinaya item which follows is a Jayadeva ashtapadi 'Rase harimiha' which shows Krishna's indifference towards a vipralabda-uttama Radha and she, reminiscing the times she spent with



him<sup>43</sup>. In the next item, Sati is portrayed as an *uttama-mugda* nayika who meditates for her marriage with Lord Shiva. Kshetrajna's padam next is again a depiction of the *virahotkhandita-uttama* nayika who has a vision of Krishna in her dream. She wakes up dissolving in tears at her loneliness and yearns to be with him. Ramayana Kirtana praises the wonderful deeds of Sri Rama in the words of Vishwamitra who takes him to Janaka's court for Sita's *swayamvaram*. Next kriti is based on *nandanar charitram* where *nandanar*, an outcaste, seeks refuge in Shiva. The last item describes the *Ananda tandava* of Lord Shiva at *Chidambaram*.

Out of the total number of nine items in the performance, five items describe one or the other aspect of Lord Siva that are devotional in nature. The others like *ashtapadi* and *padam* provide scope for the delineation of nayika who in any way is portrayed in relation to her feelings for the nayaka who is present elsewhere. We find that Rukmini Devi steers clear from choosing songs where the nayika is any other than *uttama* type. The nayika of *ashtapadi* is the divine Radha who is considered *uttama*. Her role is defined and so confined to her depiction in various Radha- Krishna myths. But Kshetrajna's nayika is comparatively nameless in an open field. She could be anyone. This is where the individual woman dancer had immense possibilities to develop a language that could be built on her improvisational skills. This is not the case only in Kshetrajna's padams but for every song in which nayaka or nayika is not named and hence does not carry a history of relying on mythological connotations. Such songs, though, which gave fullest scope for exposition of *Madura-bhakti* and an in-depth handling of *abhinaya* in its various hues and shades, occupied only a very limited place in Rukmini Devi's repertoire. As has been mentioned in the brochure (1) that states, 'Rukmini Devi seeks to portray only the transcendental emotions of the Divine Ones whom India has ever worshipped, such as Sri Krishna and Radha, Siva and Parvati, thus arousing highest elements of pure devotion in the minds of those who

witness the dance'<sup>44</sup>, through selection of items on these lines, she intended to fulfill the same.

Let us look at another performance held on September 14, 1940<sup>45</sup>. The following were the musicians:

Vocal Music- Brahma-sri Papanasam Sivan Honorary Music Director,  
Kalakshetra  
-Subramanyam of Mayavaram  
Nattuvam- Vidvan Sri P. Chokka-lingam Pillai of Pandanallur,  
Bharatanatyam teacher of Kalakshetra  
Violin- Anantarama Ayyar of Parur  
Flute- C. Balakrishna Raj of Madras  
Mridangam- Chellappa Ayyar of Palghat, Mridangam teacher of  
Kalakshetra.

Items of the repertoire :

1. Alarippu , Try-asra, Eka tala
2. Jati-svara in Vasanta, Try-asra Eka tala (by A. Sarada)
3. Varna 'Sakiye inda velayil' in Ananda Bhairavi, Catur-asra Triputa tala (by S.Radha)
4. Thillana in Todi Catura-asra, Triputa tala (by Rukmini Devi)  
Interval
5. Karnamrta- sloka 'Vadane navanita'(by S. Radha and G. Leelavati)  
composition of Meenakshisundaram Pillai
6. Tyagaraja's kirtana 'Rara Sita' in Hindola-vasanta, Try-asra Ekatala (by Rukmini Devi)
7. Marimuttu Pillai's kirtana ' Edukkittanai modi' in Surati, Try-asra Eka (by Rukmini Devi)
8. Vara-tunga Pandya's Viruttam ' Anjalendra' in Raga-malika (by Rukmini Devi)

9. Gopala-krshna Bharati's Kirtana 'Natanam adinar' in Vasanta,  
Atatala (by Rukmini Devi)

Here too the conspicuous items left out are sabdam, padam and javali, and instead the major portion of the performance focuses on the devotional numbers like kirtana, sloka and viruttam. The varnam is on the love of a nayika for Vishnu referred here as Rajagopala. The nayika is virahokhandita-uttama. Karnamrta sloka is on the antics and beauty of child Krishna. 'Rara sita' of Tyagaraja shows the bhakti of Tyagaraja towards Sri Rama. The following item, '*Edukkittanai modi*' is a padam and not a kirtana as mentioned. It gives a mocking description or a *ninda stuti* on Shiva by a nayika. The next, a *viruttam* again delves with a description of the form of Lord Shiva. The recital concludes with the depiction of the *Ananda tandava* of Shiva at Chidambaram.

Sabdam has been avoided both in the previous performance as well as this one. Rukmini Devi reveals that she replaced sabdam with kirtanas like 'Anandanatanaprakasam' and 'O jagadamba' because it contained 'very much the same kind of srngara bhava as found in padams and javalis'. She considered sabdam 'musically uninteresting' 'as it depended much on the manodharma and the quality of the singer to make it good' (1985,18). In other words, she had 'discarded' sabdam 'because it was an item which needed good music. The musical composition of a sabdam is simple, nothing special here, but unless it is sung very well, it has little value.' (1958,53) Sabdam is an item which introduces concepts of mukhaja-abhinaya and hastabhinaya in a recital. As a bridge between a sheer nritya item like jathiswaram and nritya centre-piece varnam, it is significant in many other ways. From both performer's and learner's perspective, its simple lyrics function to introduce the elementaries of bhava and use of hastas. Technically speaking, it serves as a warm up for the facial muscles before it takes on the in-depth abhinaya demanded in varnam, the next item. Sabdam's simple and small korvai-s without an

elaborate theermanam gives the dancer a break from the strenuous nritta of jathiswaram. Musically too it was unique as jathi was sung to swaras, not as in alarippu where jathis were recited or in jathiswaram where jathis were recited and swaras were sung separately. This was a character unique of dance music and the only other item that used this feature other than sabdam was *swarajati*. Apart from this, sabdams were mostly set to ragamalika where just the basics of a raga were traced out. Rukmini Devi's comments equating the sringara portrayed in padams and javalis as similar to that found in sabdam can only be categorically negated as there were inherent and significant differences. On her opinion on the musical insignificance of sabdam, it can be said that as sabdams were compositions of the traditional nattuvanars and unique to dance music, Rukmini Devi who preferred and adhered to the views of cutcheri genre of vocal music and selected items that 'excelled from a musical point of view', based the importance of its inclusion on the musical calibre of the singer more than anything else. Moreover, when Rukmini Devi was engaged at cultivating the audience's perspective targeted towards 'spiritual upliftment' that she felt was obtainable only through kritis and viruttams and slokas, other factors were 'discarded' by her in her repertoire. However, the presence of traditional teachers at Kalakshetra like Gowri ammal, Meenakshisundaram Pillai, Chokkalingam Pillai, Katumannar koil Muthukumara Pillai, Dandayudapani Pillai and Karaikkal Saradambal who followed traditional pedagogical training method gave importance to all the items in a Sadir repertoire. The senior most students at Kalakshetra who were trained under them imbibed this strategy and carried on this as a legacy of Kalashetra that is still being upheld and followed there.

Another feature of this recital is the inclusion of Tyagaraja's kriti. In the previous performance, she had danced to Muthuswami dikshitar's kirtana which was a composition of Meenakshisundaram Pillai. This Tyagaraja kriti seems to have been Rukmini Devi's own composition. The kirtanams

in their content and context of composition itself basically differed from that of a sringara pada or javali that she chose to avoid. In the Padams, the dancer is a devotee but more often on lines of a heroine who seeks the attention and love from the God who is usually portrayed as the Hero. The piece unfolds as a situational narrative more on a human level interaction with portrayal of mental of emotional conditions of the lover gradually proceeding towards the aim of ‘meeting’ her beloved. At times there is also a one to one interaction in the form of direct questioning as in the case of “Indendu vachitivi.”

In the case of kirtanams, there is a direct address or appeal to God always tinged with a sense of helplessness or despair. The emphasis is on extolling the greatness of God and a description of his attributes, its significance and the myths associated, by a bhakta or a ‘universal’ devotee and never an ‘individual’. The exalted image of God is portrayed or essentialised through episodic myths which give scope for the narrative sancharis. As kirtanams are majorly devotional numbers where the dancer’s role is more of a bhakta than a heroine, in a sense in most cases, the person addressed to is God almighty himself and not God as lover. It is the aspect of *Saranagatha* that prevails and is expressed more often in a kirtana. An example can be found in “Rara Sita” of Tyagaraja where he says, “Come O Beloved of Sita’s heart; come unto me soon. Lotus-eyed Lord! Adorable hero! Sanctify me with a kiss. I have not made my life great in yoga nor even is my devotion to thee flawless. Yet who but thou art my refuge; thou whose praises are ever sung by this Tyagaraja”

Very much unlike a padam or javali where the nayaka is a lover who is referred by name of a deity and the nayika who is the female dancer performer, in a kriti or kirtana, the god and goddess whose characters are already well defined are portrayed by the performer who is not a nayika but a bhakta in general whose sex is not identified. The main purpose of a kirtana is devotion coupled with attainment of musical excellence in

rendering. Here, the various aspects of love relationship between a man and a woman emphasized in padam genre are not given any importance. For instance, in this kriti, tyagaraja refers to Lord Rama and his consort Sita. Their roles have been well defined in Ramayana epic and their character and events in their life too are popularly known. The sahitya of a kriti consists of only these elements along with the circumstances of the poet which entail him to sing it. A dancer rendering a kriti has scope of portraying the greatness of the God or Goddess through description of their attributes of physical form or through incidents narrated from their mythical *leelas*.

The socio-cultural history provides answers about the characteristic differences between the two. Padam developed during the 17<sup>th</sup> century by gaining inspiration from *aham* and *puram* poetry of the sangam age<sup>46</sup> whereas kirtanas developed at a time when music was being developed as a specialized art form during the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Tyagaraja lived during a time when music was gaining ground as a specialised art without always being part of the accompaniment for dance. Music and dance which were important parts of *sangeeta* began to take separate identities from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Lakshmi Subramaniam (1993,24) points out that Venkatamaki's 72 melakarta classification of *Janaka* ragas during this period 'led to a more analytic grammatical vision of music to displace the earlier romantic myth oriented aesthetic vision'. And that Tyagaraja had even distanced himself from creating music that could be used for dance- 'an extreme position of total dissociation from dance taken by Tyagaraja who would not call Siva a dancer in his kritis, while he called him a Nadatanu or Nadarupa in several places'. But, eventually this separatist attitude did not stay for long among the musicians as forms like Varnam and thillana emerged out of interactions between the nattuvanars and musicians. Thus the contemporariness of the padams and the episodic myths associated with kirtanams, can be categorically latched to the issues associated with Rukmini Devi's 'spiritualising dance'.

From this concert onwards, Rukmini Devi had the help of Papanasam Sivan for singing and here, he is supported by his disciple Subrahmanyam. A significant difference from the earlier performance is this aspect where the traditional 'singers' are replaced by singers who specialized in 'vocal music'. T. S. Balasubrahmanya Pillai and K.N. Dandayudapani Pillai of the earlier recital were considered 'singers' but here, Papanasam Sivan is noted as providing 'vocal music'. It reflected a change in the stand on the music rendering where from just being singers, the support was being provided by specialists of the vocal music genre or vocalists. Change can also be noticed in the order of names in the credit which indicated the importance given to each accompanist. The nattuvanar who was listed first in the musicians with singers coming next is changed to Vocalist taking the lead place then followed by nattuvanar.

It is not clear when Meenakshisundaram Pillai left Kalakshetra. But it must have been sometime between 1940 and early 1942. Sarada mentions that she began to be actively involved in the activities of kalakshetra from the year 1939 and says that during that period, Meenakshisundaram pillai taught her how to recite the theermanam-s, the 35 talas and the sollukatu-s. It must have been for the recital during the Vijayadashami day (in 1943) when A.Sarada performed her arangetram without the support of any of the traditional nattuvanars<sup>47</sup>. Meenakshisundaram Pillai is mentioned as the honorary director of dance section of Kalakshetra in a souvenir published in the year 1940<sup>48</sup> and Sarada mentions that she had been made the Head of the Dance department of Kalakshetra in 1940. Meanwhile, Santha, another dancer, is said to have started learning dance from Meenakshisundaram Pillai at his native village of Pandanallur from the summer of 1942<sup>49</sup>. So it can be concluded that Meenakshisundaram Pillai had left Kalakshetra in the latter half of the 1940 itself.

Now let us take two programmes one held at Adyar Theatre on 14<sup>th</sup> March 1943<sup>50</sup> and another held at Indore on November 1944<sup>51</sup>. In these brochures, no information is provided regarding the musicians. By the time of this performance, both Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Chokkalingam Pillai had left Kalakshetra and it is not clear as to who provided the nattuvangam support. The items performed by Rukmini Devi on both these occasions were as usual not binding on the repertoire format and though in both the recitals varnam was performed, thillana was not. Unusually though, in this recital, Rukmini Devi is given credit for composing the kriti '*ananda natana prakasam*' which had been a main stay of her previous performances too and which had been attributed as a work of Meenakshisundaram Pillai<sup>52</sup>. It must be noted here that composers of dance items, who were usually Meenakshisundaram Pillai, Gowri ammal or Tanjore quartette or any other traditional composer of any item, was not given credit for early performances. This crediting attains significance in the context of the absence of any traditional nattuvanar in this performance or any one from their community (with surname of *Pillai*) as part of the musical support since the previous performance and of the highly valued dissociation of Kalakshetra performances from relying on support from the traditional nattuvanars.<sup>53</sup> In the following recital too, two items, a Tiger Varadachariar varnam- '*Ehi Manmatha*' in Sriranjani Aditala and a Lilasuka's Sri Kishna Karnamrita sloka- '*Atamra pani*' are mentioned as Rukmini Devi's compositions. Two padams presented on these occasions can be studied as sample to her general treatment of padams.

Kshetrajna padam- '*Bhamaro-muvvagopala*' in Kedara-gowla, Try-asra tripata is about a nayika who confides in her friend on how she is perplexed about lord Muvvagopala's feelings for her.



Ghanam Sinayya's kriti- 'Sariga kongu' in Surati, Aditala narrates a situation in which the nayika is shown as modest and the nayaka frivolous.

An exposition on the handling of the padam '*Bhamaro muvvagopala*' reveals the following. Rukmini Devi had agreed to learn and perform the padam only after she consulted the opinion of three of her male accomplices even when it was suggested by her guru Meenakshisundaram that she can learn it. The following is an excerpt from Sarada's reminiscence (1985,46): 'When it was suggested that she might dance to Kshetragna's padam '*Bhamaro muvvagopala*', Venkatachala sastri (Sanskrit teacher at Kalakshetra), who explained to her the meaning, said it was unsuitable as the *sringara* expressed was too physical. Her Guru, Meenakshisundaram Pillai, thought it suitable. My grandfather, Pandit Subramania Sastri (Dir of studies, Kalakshetra), was silent when consulted. Rukmini Devi contacted Dr. Arundale, and when he came to Kalakshetra, explained the situation to him. He finally decided that she could dance for this padam. She danced to it with grace, expressing the passion of the lovelorn damsel, with refined abhinaya. She expressed the deepest feelings of love, anger etc. in the most subtle manner and with great effect.' But we learn from her performance that she had omitted the second and third charanams of the padam. Her seeking advice on what to and what not to include in her performance meant satisfying the 'refined tenets' defined by decision making men in the family- men in one's personal family, functionaries of Kalakshetra family and prominent members representing theosophical family. It meant gaining acceptance of her dance in the space where it was to be performed at the Adyar theatre where the cognoscenti of the theosophical community would assemble. As 'refinement' is a term that is time and again associated when Rukmini Devi's acts touches concepts of the hitherto Sadir, the portrayal of 'refined abhinaya' in the 'most subtle manner' by Rukmini Devi directly refers to the presence of 'un-refined abhinaya' which is avoided by Rukmini Devi

but was in parlance otherwise. The ‘refined’ and ‘un-refined’ were defined by dictates of the dominant and ever vigilant men folk who decided what was good for women and what was not and where the individual discretionary power of the performer was non-existent.

The entire composition of the padam is as follows:

P: Emandunamma I vinta nenetu gaanammaa

A: bhaamaro muvvagopaalu delina bhaava memani telupuduneyo  
cheliyaro

C1: Premato sokkinaa vemaaru nokki kaaminci nanu bigiya

kaugilinvane gaani momu momuna jerci muddubettadaaye

2: valapu mita meeri naavaddiki vacci noruni palucani kemmovi

solasi grolene gani kuluku gubbalapaini goruluncadaye

3: paripari gatulu nannu chaala paikoni ratula pariginci

muvvagopaaludelene gaani cirudodalapai danache sokaniidye

Out of this Rukmini Devi danced only till the first charanam. The second and third were left out of her performance<sup>54</sup>.

The meaning of the padam

A. Friend ! I know not the mind of the Lord Muvva Gopala towards me.

P. What can I say O Friend! Of this wonder that hath befallen.

C. He came to me with love and made my cheeks glow a thousand times  
with desire for Him. He held me in a close embrace, but he did not lay  
his face against mine and leave me with the fragrance of a kiss.

The last two charanams portrayed sambhoga srngara with descriptions of intimate moments that the heroine shared with her lover.

Taking the case of ‘*Sariga kongu*’, a *javali* composition of Ghanam Krishna Iyer and not a *kriti* of Ghanam Sinayya as mentioned in the brochure (4), the lyrics and its translation given are as follows:

P. A. Sariga kongu musugu danito vadu

saiga chesinadi kantine

C. Tirigi tirigi jucukoni sogasuga  
Devudaina Mannaru Rangudu

Translation as given in the brochure:

P.A. In the dusk Radha goes on her way, but seeing Sri Kishna pass by she covers her face with her golden sari. From under the cover of the sari she glances towards Him as if beckoning to Him.

C. At her glance, many times He turns round and gazes at her. He the Lord Ranga who played with Gopi-s and cunningly stole from them their milk and butter.

Another way of directly translating this javali will be:

P.A. Have you seen Him making signs to the woman covering  
her head with the edge of the sari embroidered with silver threads?

C. Again and again, He the God mannAru raMga is looking  
at her handsomely and divinely!

This is actually a javali where a woman makes a passing reference to an incident where another lady in the process of covering her head with her sari is looked at again and again by the hero who is referred to as Mannaruranga. In the song, there is no mention that the woman referred to is Radha or that the man who steals her glance is Krishna. Reference to Lord Ranga definitely means that the hero is Lord Vishnu. And for the sake of developing a sanchari, his incarnation as Krishna and his frolics with the maiden women-gopis could be shown in the dance, though it is not part of the song but present only in the translated version as given in the brochure. The position mentioned of Radha is thus questionable here. As none of these characters of Radha or Krishna finds mention in the simple two line lyric of the javali, an inference drawn here can easily put into perspective the interference made in the act of deriving and portrayal of meaning in Rukmini Devi's dance. Here, it is being intentionally implied that any secular woman cannot be seen in dalliance with the Lord.

And at the same time, it has to be only a divine character like Radha who can be looked at by Lord Ranga. To justify Radha's presence in the *javali*, Lord Ranga was considered to be Sri Krishna. His role had to be further justified in relation to his antics with the gopis too, and this act is added as if to undermine the importance given in the *javali* of showing only the looks that he gives Radha (another woman in actuality). A simple plane of existential realism between any woman and man, considered as God here, is dislocated by conceiving the nayika as Radha in order to essentialise upon Radha-krishna's mythical connotations. Sarada (1985,46) refers to '*Sariga kongu*' as one of the masterpieces of Rukmini Devi wherein she recalls that Rukmini Devi 'identified herself completely with the divine child Krishna and depicted his mischievous deeds, to captivate the audience.' It is surprising and in fact confusing to note that Rukmini Devi had indeed portrayed a sanchari of child Krishna and his mischievous childhood deeds which appears so far-fetched in comparison to the context of this *javali*, just to show the mischievousness inherent in his character when he passes looks at a woman.

A similar occurrence can be noted in another padam present in the repertoire of Rukmini Devi. Sabhapati Ayyar's pada '*Tamrasaksha*' in Yadukulakambhoji raga depicts the angst and pangs of separation experienced by a virahotkandita nayika that is communicated to the nayaka by the sakhi. In a compilation of songs of Rukmini Devi's repertoire<sup>55</sup>, a translation of the above padam mentions that this padam is narrated by Radha's friend to Krishna. The words '*Tamrasaksha*' and '*vannedura*' present in the padam refer to Vishnu or Krishna. But there is no mention found of Radha in the lyrics. Again here we can see that the inclusion of Radha in the description is done in order to displace the interpretation of the Padam from having anything to do with a secular plane of existence and to transport it to a divine plane of comprehension. Moreover, the Radha- Krishna myth finds its presence in all parts of India except the south as south had consolidated its faith through madurabhakti

where Krishna and Radha were better known by various names and forms of Lord Vishnu and his consort Goddess Mahalakshmi. They were names of deities which corresponded to the myths associated with a holy place and about whom the vaggeyakaras sang about. So, here such a direct reference made to nayaka and nayika as Krishna and Radha is foreign to south Indian cultural thought and was meant more to subvert even the remotest possibility of a secular image depicted through such pada-s.

#### **2.4. ‘Spirituality’ re-designed: Tending the way ahead**

Annie Besant’s (1898) belief that ‘India in the past was given by the Supreme One, the great duty among the nations of the world, to be the mother of religion, to be the cradle of faith to send out to all other peoples the truths of the spiritual life’<sup>56</sup> and effected by her choice that ‘Brahmins were the people who were ordained to be rightful leaders of Indian society’<sup>57</sup> privileged Rukmini Devi as the chosen one. Rukmini Devi was proclaimed to be one of the messengers or carriers who were to spread ‘the truths of spiritual life’ and lead the ‘World mother’ movement. The ‘truths of the spiritual life’ were enmeshed in such prefabricated casteist bias/beliefs and faith based ‘spiritual’ missions that ennobled the concept of hierarchy in society. The latter had underpinnings of Besant’s experience with Christian faith on the feeling that Christianity had ‘lost its mystic and esoteric teaching’ by following protestant reforms which in her words was ‘spurious sentimentality - which refuses to recognize the obvious inequalities of intelligence and morality, and thereby reduces the teaching of the highly developed to the level attainable by the least evolved, sacrificing the higher to the lower in a way that injures both - had no place in the virile common sense of the early Christians’ (Besant 1914). Coupled with her orientalist leanings that were in opposition to the missionary ideals of the British East India company, these provided contexts that complied to revealing what the ‘truths’ were also meant to be. More than these measures, Rukmini Devi was also crowned as ‘Devi’

by Besant to realize what can be said as her divine feminine vision (Meduri 2005c).

Arundale, in his turn, took forward this initiative promulgated by Besant by scripting the oeuvre of his wife's entry into the arena of Bharatanatyam. Sarada, reminiscing on the first performance of Rukmini Devi says, 'Dr. Arundale spoke on the spiritual nature of this Indian dance. His speeches in between the dance were equally fascinating'. (1985,1) He said 'a revival of Bharata Natya based on religion and spirituality would help the regeneration of India'(1985,43). As Rukmini Devi's first performance got a positive response from the audience, he affirmed the prerogatives of his agenda. Ramnarayan (1984,21) says that Dr. Arundale felt it was the right time to 'initiate a new movement for the promotion of beauty and art.' The agenda thus formulated and affirmed by Arundale had as its major contents-'revival of Bharata Natya' and 'regeneration of India': 'revival of Bharatanatyam' with reference to all that Rukmini Devi did with the dance form and spiritual 'regeneration' of India through the language of 'beauty and art' being the main concepts of Theosophy. He writes thus on Rukmini Devi in a programme brochure: "The whole world is waiting release into light and peace from its present darkness and confusion. In every field ardent workers are needed. To the field of culture Rukmini Devi has given herself, beginning her work in India, for as India is the heart of the world, so is India's age old culture the background of all world culture. To Rukmini Devi "Religion is Divinity expressed inwardly; art is Divinity expressed outwardly." She holds that one "cannot separate religion from art, and when one is creating a piece of art one should be inspired by the same lofty idealism as when one goes into a temple or church to worship." So under the holy Blessing of Sri Nata-raja, in whose dwelling-place at Chid-ambaram she has offered reverent worship, she seeks to help to revive India's ancient cultural glories, especially in the rekindling of the Flame of Bharata-natya-the Lord Siva's Dance of Growing Life."

In one of the programme brochures, the lines of which have been quoted at many places, Rukmini Devi's dance is introduced thus:

“A feature of Smt. Rukmini Devi’s programmes is their strict adherence to tradition. Except where noted, there is no movement, flexion, turn or leap which is not of the purest style in Bharata Natya though many symbols and movements lost to the art as now practiced, have been revived by her through strenuous study of old books and sculpture. This adherence to tradition helps the spectator to contact Indian culture as it is rather than as it seems to an interpreter. This should not be understood to mean that there is lack of creative imagination. Bharata Natya is an art with vast possibilities for unlimited individual expression. This is proved by the fact that nearly all the dances in Rukmini Devi’s programmes are new and composed by her and her great teacher Sri. Meenakshisundaram Pillai. She has merely helped the art to grow along the way appointed for it by the great sages of the past.’

Pandit S.Subramania Sastry<sup>58</sup>, in his writings on Interpretation of Bharatanatya in some of the early brochures strongly contended upon these facets mentioned by Arundale and sources from literary texts on dance to develop the ‘tradition’ of Bharatanatyam that would simultaneously be consolidated by Rukmini Devi. Sastry adds:

‘Rukmini Devi derives her inspiration from that music of the great composers of South India which rises in adoration to the Gods. Thus the Bhakti-Rasa is the key-note of Rukmini Devi’s dance. Rejecting the degraded feelings expressed in most of the songs associated in these days with the dance, Rukmini Devi seeks to reflect the emotions in their purity and to evoke in the audience a sense of upliftment.’<sup>59</sup>

These introductions succinctly presents Rukmini Devi’s ideological approach to Bharatanatyam that was pre-conceived and shaped by Arundale and Sastry. It provides me with ground base for critiquing the said concepts and building perspectives for further analysis. What I understand from Sastry’s reference to Rukmini Devi’s dance mentioned to be the ‘purest style in Bharatanatyam’ is that Bharatanatyam was once original or ‘pure’ and the same dance is being reconstructed or revived by Rukmini Devi through her strenuous study of old books and sculpture. Rukmini Devi is credited with reflecting ‘the emotions in their purity’. What are ‘emotions in their purity’? Does it mean intending to portray emotions in the pure or correct way like through ‘pure’ sringara or ‘pure’

hasya and so on? Looking at it in context, 'Bhakti-rasa' is meant to be 'pure' and 'degraded feelings' are impure. That way, it is not the Purity that is in question but the emotions conveyed that are. What kind of emotion is pure according to Arundale, Sastry or Rukmini Devi? The emotion that deflects all other bhavas and connotes only bhakti is considered 'pure'. Another sentence mentions that 'she has merely helped the art to grow along the way appointed for it by the great sages of the past' and it is her 'adherence to tradition that helps the spectator to contact Indian culture as it is rather than as it seems to an interpreter'. Here, it is meant that the basic aesthetics of the art were decided by 'great sages' of the ancient times and any variance from it was considered unauthentic. The dancer is not considered to be an interpreter in the sense that there is no subjective element in the presentation. The dancer is just a channel to propagate the culture handed over by 'great sages'. Sarada (1985,4) mentions that Arundale considered 'Dance as a channel for spiritual forces'. He had declared, after returning from a trip to Chidambaram where Rukmini Devi had planned to dedicate the dance of her students Radha and Leela that 'this art work of Rukmini Devi was for the welfare of India. The work would advance the emancipation of our Nation. It could be used as a channel for the spiritual power of Lord Nataraja. So persons working in this institution should dedicate themselves to the highest ideals for which it was established'. What were these highest ideals? A note on Kalakshetra points out to Rukmini Devi's ardent hope that the centre may help to revive throughout India the true spirit of the arts, so that India's reawakening freedom may become beautiful and true through the re-birth in every Indian home of the age-old Indian culture'<sup>60</sup>.

Emancipation, as referred to by Arundale, meant freedom from foreign rule but also a 'beautiful' and 'true' 'reawakening freedom', according to Rukmini Devi, through 're-birth of age-old Indian culture' - a culture that was far removed from having any notions of then prevalent contemporary



culture especially Sadir. And what did 'revival of true spirit of the arts' mentioned by Rukmini Devi signify? It meant the reviving of the dance that represented the 'true spirit' suffused with 'spiritual power' of Lord Nataraja. Thus a path was tended to and determined by Arundale for projecting Rukmini Devi as a potent arbitrator of Indian 'renaissance' and 'India's rebirth' that would help to 'redeem' India. Besant provided a pedestal for Rukmini Devi to become a 'Devi' and Arundale equipped the Devi with necessary attributes and Sastry illuminated the image with a halo of 'spiritual' Bharatanatyam. It was now Rukmini Devi's turn, idolized as Devi, bestowed upon the duty of a resuscitator of the best in Indian arts and as a guide towards the path of spiritual power of Lord Nataraja, to carry the strategy forward. These discourses decidedly determined to unmake the history and beliefs of a living tradition and imposed invented ideologies to perpetuate the institutionalization of this artform, where the immediate history was bypassed and erased. The history of a living Sadir was struck in a whirlpool of discovered texts and re-discovered mythologies that led his-stories of a new Bharata Natyam.

At this point, it becomes pertinent to look at the evoking of Nataraja metaphor in dance. Nataraja or the dancing Shiva is symbolic of the concepts of 'Satyam, shivam, sundaram' of Indian religious thought that equates truth and beauty with God. He also embodies in his dance, acts of creation, preservation, destruction, salvation and veiling the real with illusions or worldly deeds. Apart from just invoking the name of Lord Nataraja before or during her performance, Rukmini Devi also started a trend of placing the idol of Nataraja on the front right side of the stage<sup>61</sup>. Nataraja iconography which till then was not invoked by dancers on the stage, from then on became a power symbol to reckon a faith of practicing the spirit of the Lord's dance. The image on stage proclaimed a power to legitimizing the performance of the dancer and justifying its claim to mythological origins. But, unfortunately this was done to nullify the

agency of human hand in perpetuation of the tradition of dance and to rather undermine the contributions of the professional dancing class.

The revivalist phase in Indian national history saw some of these associations with religious motifs growing stronger through works of writers and historians like Ananda Coomaraswamy who found in the Nataraja iconography a strong culmination of medieval south Indian religious poetry, philosophy and the best in chola iconography. He had brought out its significances into the popular fray in order to quell the disputation of western aestheticians who considered that ‘in Indian art the multiplication of limbs or heads, or addition of any animal attributes, is in itself a very grave defect, and fatal to any claim for merit’<sup>62</sup>. Though, in his essay ‘The dance of Shiva’(1924), he had dealt with the dance aspect of shiva and the image of Nataraja as representing the synthesis of science, religion and art, he highlighted the philosophical symbolism of the image from references made by ancient and medieval tamil poets and its significance with regard to sculpture and not with reference to the practice of dance by devadasis in the temples nor any other prevalent dance practice of his time into focus. Coomaraswamy is understood to have invariably resorted to orientalist leanings perpetrating a renaissance in the arts as a counter measure towards the Anglican approaches of assessing Hindu society and art aesthetics. Likewise, personalities like Arundale too who used it as a right opportunity to rope in the symbology of Nataraja provided by Coomaraswamy and the like to validate Rukmini Devi’s contribution and the changes she made to the traditional format. As Thakurta (1992,198) points out in the context of the art in pre-independent India, that ‘tradition was exalted as a value in itself; as a perennial value of any great art’, here, tradition, exalted through the motif of Shiva –Nataraja, was articulated to serve the same as it became so conspicuous in Rukmini Devi’s dances from then on. So, when Rukmini Devi danced to Dikshitar’s ‘*Ananda natana prakasam*’, the type of song (kriti) never attempted by devadasis, she was making her stand clear. The

dance of joy or bliss of Nataraja is characterized also to accentuate new subtexts of creation, preservation and destruction attempted by Rukmini Devi. The following were the ways in which she combined various strands of her ideals to perpetuate her dance as representing the quintessential theme of 'the brand spiritualism':

Proclaiming Bharatanatyam's origin and purpose

Designating and legitimizing one's role

Posturing counter strategies

Validating creative ventures

#### **2.4.1 Proclaiming Bharatanatyam's origin and purpose**

#

Rukmini Devi (1961,1) strongly believed that classical dances originated from the temples and that 'the impulse that gave them birth was religious.' According to her, they were conceived, nourished and attained their full stature in the temple. She opined that though 'we have no more temple dancing today, we can bring the spirit of the temple to the stage'(1979,15). It was based on this perception that she made many changes to the dance as was performed by the dancers from devadasi community. From her costume, which were modelled on temple sculptures, her items from repertoire and drama compositions which mainly expressed devotional themes, her new theatre which according to her had 'temple atmosphere' and 'many features of the temple'(1983a,4) and the placement of Nataraja idol on stage and performing of puja before commencement of any dance drama can be seen as manifestations of such a perception. These new features were stimulated with a view to counter the presence of any secular or nonreligious influence in dance<sup>63</sup>. So much so, that she hoped 'a time will come when the dance will find a home in the temple again, atleast so far as the Upacharas- the religious aspects- are concerned (1958,50) and looked 'for a future where in India great dancers

who are priests and priestesses of beauty will give their highest Art in the most sacred of all places- the temple'<sup>64</sup>.

Rukmini Devi, in making these claims, pronounced the norms of Bharata Natyam to be totally ritualistic and sacred, with religion as the inextricable element of the form. She credited it to be the sole property of temples, deriving its history from myths and ancient texts, where the dance form's history as in the contemporary oral tradition perpetuated by devadasis or nattuvanars were not let to come anywhere within *her*-story of the form. She said, 'I believe in ancient art, but do not believe in the degenerated immediate ancient'.<sup>65</sup> This belief stood guard against any theory where its evolution was outside the precincts of the temple which, even if it was to be so, as was the case of sadir concert form, was enough reason for it to be understood as 'polluted' with 'impurities' like *narastuti*, erotic songs, and other 'degraded' elements as it were not representative of the temple spirit/ religious spirit and hence not 'pure' and considered foreign to the dance. Speaking of what revival means to her, Rukmini Devi stated at a conference (1940c,53):

"I feel while we should think about the technique of the art, if the Mudras are according to the Sastras, whether the movements and gestures are correct, we must also remember it is not the revival of technique alone that we must think about, it is the revival of the spirit which is the foundation. We are building the superstructure not on that foundation but on some other foundation. We are building it somewhere else. We must go back to the original foundation but must not stay there. We must progress according to the spirit which has been given to the world for the benefit of mankind and only if we can enter into that stream of creative art can India once again achieve her greatness"

Rukmini Devi suffused her definition of 'spiritual' by interpreting them repeatedly with few adjectival qualifiers that essentialised on oppositional binary connotations to whatever implied. With these she constructed or rather invented what can be called 'the brand spiritualism'. In almost all her dance drama programme notes, Rukmini Devi mentions her intention

behind presenting the productions. In them, she emphasizes the spiritual significance of her work and refers to this concept in various ways- to 'have an elevating influence on all who witness it'<sup>66</sup>, 'give to all a sense of beauty that purifies and uplifts'<sup>67</sup>, 'evoke devotion in the hearts of the people'<sup>68</sup>, 'transcend the lower' and so on. How was her 'spirituality' termed differently from that practiced by professional class of dancers who were spiritual in their own right? And how did she propagate her brand of 'spirituality'? The professional class had already been condemned as 'prostitutes' both by the reformists, missionaries circle and the revivalists. Rukmini Devi, hence resorted to constructing 'spiritualism' in dance which was constantly prodded by binary prefixtures like – 'real', 'true', 'pure', 'elevates', 'uplifts', 'beauty', 'refinement', 'divine', 'highest ideals', 'authentic', 'clean' - ones that had underlying binary oppositional connotations in her speeches and writings. On the performing space, she propagated her brand of 'spirituality' through changes manifested in costume, items of the repertoire, placement of musicians on stage, musical instruments used for the performance, pitch of singing, replacement of traditional nattuvanars singers with vocalists specialized in cutcheri music, deletion of erotic portions of padams, inclusion of kritis, creating a temple-stage aesthetics by conducting puja before performance, placing idol of Nataraja on stage and so on as has been discussed earlier too. Thus she was successful in creating a dialogue tangentially opposite to the characteristic features that devadasi was accused of. To Gaston, (1991, 96) who, in her study of the development of the repertoire of Modern Bharatanatyam (1930's to 1990's) says that it 'has assumed many of the characteristics of an 'invented tradition'', I add to state that Rukmini Devi herself played a major interventionist role to invent the tradition of Bharatanatyam.

Rukmini Devi said 'dance is the offering of your angas and upangas to the Divine Mother because the body is the temple of dance. I consider dance as a consecration'. 'If you depart from the purely imaginative, the mystical,

the religious, you depart from the very spirit of the Indian Dance'<sup>69</sup>. How did 'imaginative', 'mystical' and 'religious' become factors that determined 'dance as a consecration'? Did they when they towed in line with the 'very spirit of the Indian Dance'? And who interpreted what the 'very spirit' was meant to be to decide whether those factors departed from the spirit of Indian Dance? Rukmini Devi's quaverings are rather impressionistic compared to Balasaraswati's experiential analogies. Balasaraswati too had said: "Bharata Natyam is an art which consecrates the body which is in itself of no value. The yogi by controlling his breath and by modifying his body acquires the half of sanctity. Even so, the dancer, who dissolves her identity in rhythm and music, makes her body an instrument, at least for the duration of the dance, for the experience and expression of the spirit'<sup>70</sup>.

Both held the view that dance was a means to an end but the difference lay in what they gave priority to. Rukmini Devi saw dance as a consecration i.e, devotion, a devotional means to reach god, for which it uses the body as a vehicle. It is where dance is made an act of consecration, an act of devotion through body where the body expresses its devotion through dance and where the primary concern becomes the act of showing devotion. For Balasaraswati, Bharatanatyam sanctified the body. The dance was a means as well as an end in itself as she points out, 'it is divine as it is innately so' and also helps in 'revealing the spiritual through the corporeal'. The difference lies in Rukmini Devi's 'Making' the dance as a means to an end and Balasaraswati's Realizing dance to be a means to an end. Balasaraswati clearly exemplifies this in the allegory that she makes up in the stages of Bharatanatyam recital and a devotee's journey through the temple precincts to worship the deity. She states that after the tillana, 'the dancer completes the traditional order by dancing to a simple devotional verse' akin to the devotee who 'takes to his heart the god he has so far glorified outside'<sup>71</sup>.

Bala added: 'For those who have yielded themselves to its discipline with total dedication, dance like music is the practice of the Presence; it cannot be merely the body's rapture'. This was stated on countering Rukmini Devi's claim for 'purifying' sringara. However, Rukmini Devi, in her move towards rejecting and 'purifying' Sringara, tried to capture the experience not of the 'Presence' but built on presumptive raptures associated to an ancient past. This is evident from how she intended to 'stretch the imagination till it envelops the whole being'<sup>72</sup> to understand the spirit of Art and its expressions and how 'we have to stretch ourselves into the ancient spirit of India' to understand the 'real culture' offered by 'great teachers like Bhishma and the Lord Buddha' (1940a,4). This can be understood in the context of myth making and myth embodiment. Ramnarayan (1999, 37), referring to myth embodiment, once said, 'Balamma achieved her sadharanikarana (universalisation) with a sense of balance'. 'Instead of narration, she offered suggestion; instead of drama, only lyricism. She achieved this by the use of a highly charged imagery and many symbols'. She pointed out how 'Narrativity and realism do provide easy access to the myth for both performer and viewer- whether old myths or new myths or old myths interpreted a new. But they tend to make the myth static'. I would refer to this as myth making. This is what Rukmini Devi tried to do in her dance dramas.

#### **2.4.2. Designating and legitimizing one's role**

After positioning the origin of Bharata Natya to temple, Rukmini Devi determined her position and role in practice and propagation of the dance. It was not easy to gain a steady stand in the performance arena at a time when Music academy had thrown open the iron curtain to showcase an array of devadasis and had encouraged 'respectable women' to adopt and learn this art. At this point, many new performers began to take limelight and some of them like Baby Kamala worked her place through her charm and popularity and Balasaraswati who had a strong backing from her

culturally rich devadasi background, Rukmini Devi pushed forward the idea of intervention of an invisible hand in deciding her entry. Rukmini Devi too had to make her hay when the sun shined in order to sustain her reasoning to legitimize her role play in the practice of the dance. Moreover, with the responsibility of carrying forward the *world mother movement* in principle and now an International academy of arts that weighed on her, she had to have her options into creating a reason strong enough to be noticed with awe and respect and not be taken lightly. The role she designated for herself was that of a *Messenger*. It had become the messenger's 'mission' where the messenger was ordained to lead the dance from darkness to light. The 'unexpected mission', as she puts it, in her life was 'to learn Indian dance and to give all the art a great place in the India of the future and the message India has to give to the world regarding the meaning of true art'(Rukmini Devi 2001a,7). She invoked caste affiliations for claiming legitimacy of the dance as well as her role as dancer-composer. She states 'we trace our culture through works on art written thousands of years ago and say, this was the work of a great rishi. Just as the Brahmin speaks of his *gotra*; in a sense we may say that in India various branches of culture have each their own *gotra* because each can be traced back to a rishi.'(2001b,58). This concept was brought into play to justify the name Bharata Natya that she claims to have given Sadir<sup>73</sup> and consider the dance as Bharata's Natya linking its origin to the Bharata muni's or rishi's Natya Sastra. Lineage or *gotra* or surname of every family in Brahmin community is traced to a male Brahman sage and is known by his name. Rukmini Devi, here, attributes the authorship of any ancient work on art to a rishi and tags the brahminical concept of *gotra* which would mean that the author of the work was only a Brahman rishi. This concept is generalized here to conveniently and dominantly posit that all great ancient works are only contributions of Brahmans and that all sages or rishis can only be Brahmans.

At another occasion, she confidently remarks thus: "I was the very first among Brahmins of cultured families to take to this art and the persons



who appreciated me most and supported me were the great musicians of the time. Even though they were orthodox they thought that this was really according to the sastras” (Ramnarayan 1984a,20). Here, quality assessment of art was done against the yardstick called sastra. First, she qualifies herself with a hyphenated status even within the dominant caste- as being from among ‘cultured’ brahmin families and the great musicians of the time are referred to as ‘orthodox’ in the sense that they generally did not approve of Sadir but supported her as her dance was really according to the sastras. Looking more closely, when ‘this’ Bharatanatyam was really according to the sastras, it meant that ‘that’- the other- that was Sadir was not according to the Sastras. So being orthodox and following sastras were at one end of the spectrum and Sadir was at the other end. They were rather at two poles that according to Rukmini Devi did not meet.

### **2.4.3. Posturing counter strategies**

From designating herself as being ordained in the role of messenger and a brahman, it was time for further dissections that she felt she was authorized to conduct. Developing counter strategies entailed description of oneself by positive characteristic subjectivities which indirectly implied the other with negative and oppositional connotations. Such a usage was meant to derive mileage out of constructing and imposing oppositional accusations on ‘the other’, be it devadasi’s dance or other modern western arts. For example, Rukmini Devi very often used the following terminologies: real, true, pure, elevates, uplifts, inspires, beauty, refinement, divine, highest ideals, spiritual, authentic, clean and likewise to explain her work or contribution. Natarajan opines that Rukmini Devi’s vocabulary was ‘mystically evocative rather than descriptive’ and transferred locality based traditions into universalist aesthetic paradigm’(1997,189).

During the period of 'renaissance' of Indian arts, the movement against the devadasi dance was growing stronger. Indians, especially the nationalist congress leaders, were particular about what to showcase and what not to showcase in the Indian culture. E. Krishna Iyer was a pioneer in the 'revival' of Sadir and almost during the same time Rukmini Devi brought in her own concepts of 'reforming' Sadir. She says 'I tried in many ways to reform it to clean it so to speak. But when I say "clean it", I do not mean that the dance was anything wrong. I considered it like a great jewel which had been encrusted with dust and dirt. But the jewel was a jewel and not tinsel. The only thing needed was to remove what did not belong to it, and then to reveal the beauty of the jewel itself.' She refers to this cleaning at different instances as 'separating gold from dross', 'refining gold' and 'spiritualizing'. 'What belonged to it' and 'what did not belong to it' were unto her discretion as she felt she was the one entitled to do it. The changes she had incorporated about which has been discussed earlier, include vis-à-vis changes in costume, items of the repertoire, placement of musicians on stage, musical instruments used for the performance, pitch of singing, replacement of traditional nattuvanars who sang with vocalists specialized in cutcheri music, deletion of erotic portions of padams, inclusion of kritis, creating a temple-stage aesthetics by conducting puja before performance, placing idol of Nataraja on stage and so on.

She encouraged an exclusionist perception developed by countering and condemning the modernist art movement of the west. In a lecture at her institution Kalakshetra, she recounts her encounter with modern art thus, 'Many years ago, when I visited the art galleries of the west I saw that they contained many pictures that were crude and unrefined. There was an utter lack of the sense of proportion.' She then presents her counter stand with the case 'Bharatanatyam'. She asks-'What are the special features of the Bharata Natya that make it different from other forms of dance? The first and foremost difference is that it has soul. It is not an

empty form. Bharata Natya is pure. It is not a form of dance into which vulgarity can be easily introduced and that is why I have been doing my best to eliminate this foreign element that had crept in but it is not the dance that is vulgar but the dancer who misuses it.’(Rukmini Devi 2004,122) The point is built up to eliminate any influence from ‘other’ culture- both local as well as western, by despising them as ‘crude’, ‘unrefined’ and ‘vulgar’ and which are according to her impure , soulless and formless compared to Bharata Natyam. A good explanation that she reasons as a cause for the world war is the west’s inherent vulgarity or ugliness. She says, ‘if you ask me why there is a war in the world, I would say because there has been ugliness. The west has been responsible for much of it. I might say today there is so much science without emotion and intellect without inspiration and this has brought into life vulgarity. Vulgarity has come on the stage, into dance, into music.’(Rukmini Devi 1940b,46) For her, ‘the dancer represents Joy’. She essentialises its purpose to reason on ‘how much we need anything that expresses joy in this unhappy world where suffering is everywhere’ (Rukmini Devi 1940a) Ideas on romantic classical ideals and their escapist nostalgia appealed to her. Art had to ‘inspire’ with its universalist ideals and art reflecting the contextual concerns that could be socio-political or geo-cultural with proactive or reactive contents were considered unacceptable. She said, ‘If we are inspired by the kind of art produced by Epstein<sup>74</sup>; there is only one result possible- war. But if we are inspired by the glorious art of Persia, of Greece, of our own Indian temples, of the Taj Mahal, there will be produced peace and happiness.’(1940a)

In the early years, Kalakshetra did have courses or subjects that dealt with appreciation of western music and drama. Alex Elmore and later Paul storm used to teach a full time diploma course in theatre arts that involved western methodology of drama teaching where a good standard in English was mandatory for a student applying for the course<sup>75</sup>. In the later years, after this period, the course on dramatics no longer existed. If

it was one rule for the students of drama who had to be fluent in english, it was another for students of dance whom Rukmini Devi 'detested speaking in english'.<sup>76</sup> In fact Rukmini Devi's early experiments with dance and drama in works such as *Bhishma*<sup>77</sup>, performed for the theosophical society audience had involved exclusive usage of English. So this turn in her perception may have been caused by two reasons- policy of dissociation of Kalakshetra from the theosophical society in the year 1949<sup>78</sup> together with the feeling of 'exclusiveness' that she followed in pursuing art like Bharatanatyam. This exclusiveness was practiced to the extent of discouraging solo performances within the college and not permitting the students from giving any public solo recitals outside Kalakshetra even if they had offers to perform<sup>79</sup>. This issue of exclusiveness developed as a marker of 'purity' or 'authenticity' to sustain the 'spirituality' dialogue of Rukmini Devi and Arundale. It was also followed to prevent intrusion of contemporary or modern foreign cultural elements as identified in different instances in the above discussion. This stage as propounded by Rukmini Devi reflects Chatterjee's (1986, 28) 'moment of departure' which he marks as the first among the three ideological stages<sup>80</sup> of nationalist thought that 'asserts that the superiority of the west lies in the materiality of its culture exemplified by its science, technology and love of progress' but considers 'the east is superior in the spiritual aspect of culture' (1986, 50-51). Rukmini Devi expressed the same thoughts in these words when she cites 'lack of real culture' as a 'reason for war' in which a 'sense of cruelty, superiority, intellect has taken a far greater place in modern civilization than the heart' which can be remedied by India which she says can provide the heart aspect of life for the world' (1940a,2).

But, the issue of exclusiveness stands contradictory with regard to Meduri's (2004) claim of positioning Rukmini Devi as a transnational visionary who contemporized Bharatanatyam. It is understandable to see Rukmini Devi as a 'global theosophist', who 'worked on behalf of the

transnational world view of the theosophical society'. But Meduri's claim that Rukmini Devi 'developed a multicultural and cosmopolitan world for Bharatanatyam', 'conceptualised world culture vision for Bharatanatyam' or 'contemporized Bharatanatyam' cannot be accepted without looking at the facts. Meduri promotes this idea on the basis of crediting Rukmini Devi who 'renamed the dance as Bharata Natya, and performed it on the occasion of the diamond jubilee celebrations of the theosophical society, in 1935'...where 'she used stage lighting imported from British stage craft, and recostumed restaged and theatricalised the dance in the manner of Isadora Duncan.' I have critiqued these changes or interventions by Rukmini Devi and countered Meduri's stand at earlier instances. Meduri's argument that Rukmini Devi developed 'multicultural and cosmopolitan world for Bharatanatya' (2004, 14) has to be restated precisely as a multicultural and cosmopolitan world 'at Kalakshetra' and not 'for Bharatanatya'.

The institutions including Arundale teacher training centre, crafts and weaving centre, U.V. Swaminatha Iyer library, Besant Theosophical school and Kalakshetra, with its courses offered in dance, music, drama and painting, invited experts from varied disciplines from India and abroad and had a multicultural student base with students coming from all over the world to Kalakshetra. But the question is did this multicultural ambience provided at Kalakshetra necessarily or readily create an intercultural or inter-disciplinary dialogue across this set-up between each individual institution to affect Bharatanatya. Though, in some cases like the students of Besant school who could benefit from attending classes at Kalakshetra or by following the Montessori methodology otherwise, there was no dialogue or interaction even between the disciplines within Kalakshetra unless otherwise support from music or painting or stage was needed during the shows. However, all these contributed to providing a transnational history for the institution, Kalakshetra or to viewing Rukmini Devi as a transnational personality but not Rukmini Devi as

having ‘articulated a transnational history for Bharatanatya’ or ‘contemporary aesthetic for Bharatanatyam’ as inferred by Meduri (2004,16).

Meduri had said earlier with reference to Bharatanatyam being performed both at the local and global arena (1988,4) where she pointed out how the contemporary Bharatanatyam dancer finds it difficult to reconcile and resolve the contradictions of cultural reflex in reality. She had said: “Today’s bharatanatyam, with its danced stories of God evoked in a secular world, is analogous to a human being walking forward with his face turned backwards. I hasten to add that this peculiar analogy is true only of contemporary Indian dance’.

To Meduri who had articulated conflicting thoughts on the contemporariness of Bharatanatyam in the 1980’s, did the aesthetics provided by Rukmini Devi resolve the contradictions within a span of twenty years or had the discourse tilted from its secular obligations of the 1980’s in order to enact significations of a multicultural alignment of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Or had the form by now justified its presence acknowledged by the ‘inclusiveness’ of multicultural society in the 21st century no matter how persuasive the same contents of the dance had become? However, though, it can be surmised that it was a contemporary role for a form with enhanced religiousity as the aesthetic that was articulated by Rukmini Devi, the form seems to have justified its presence through translocal and transglobal modalities as claimed by Meduri. Whatever the case, the west, to negotiate its power in the global rhetoric began to sing hoshannas to globalise the local, to instill a perennial otherness to give a local edge to the global. If it was the secularity of a society that questioned the religiosity of Bharatanatyam, is it not the multiculturalism of the same society that patronizingly now co-opts the same form? What does Bharatanatyam stand to gain or lose from this change articulated in terms best known as a discourse reflecting propriety of postmodern times?

#### 2.4.4. Validating creative ventures

Rukmini Devi vehemently and outrightly disqualifies creative ventures attempted by her contemporaries. What makes her stand interesting is the fact that she makes such subjective statements on public platforms that shows how highly she valued her own ideas. One of her highly opinionated comments goes thus: “To develop a new form of Indian dance, will mean a new creation in every way; new music, new technique including new movements, new mudras, new poetry, new ornaments, stories etc. perhaps something new is possible in the hands of a genius or a great rishi. If this new dance comes through any other source, as it is trying to come today, we can have the satisfaction of feeling that India has created something new, but it will definitely be the death of beauty, the death of India, for there is nothing more dangerous than the leadership of the ignorant.”(1974,116). It can be deduced that though *Sadir* as performed before she entered into this field was not only criticized by Rukmini Devi, but also changed to accommodate her views in many ways, Rukmini Devi also frowned upon what was attempted by her contemporaries. However, she was fastidious in justifying her own creativity in two ways- as in recreating the old spirit of the bygone era by presuming it in her own terms and projecting those as ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ and in creating the new by following, what according to her again was, the ‘true’ spirit of the art form. In her engagement with dance, which involved recreating the old ‘authentic spirit’ and creating the new ‘true spirit’, she rejected and erased the importance of the existence of an immediate past and the present (then contemporary) form of devadasi dance.

An introductory note on Kalakshetra<sup>81</sup> says that ‘Rukmini Devi does not believe that one should attempt to resuscitate the past or to recreate the contemporary world as a replica of it.’ It can be seen how when she is judgemental on other’s creativity, she justifies her own creative

engagement with creating the new true spirit when she was faced with opposition from some quarters mainly from her traditional teachers who expressed their reservations about her dance dramas<sup>82</sup>. She remarked that 'the traditionalists must appreciate that art does not stand still. Look at our temple architecture; here you have the pallava period you also have other periods. Every period has its own art. Art develops of its own accord. It is constantly growing: it doesn't remain frozen in time. The only thing that does not change is the spirit of dedication, the quest for truth, goodness and beauty. As long as that spirit lives on, the forms may change, but good art will still be created in every age'(Joshi 2001,48). With regard to creativity and changes necessary to be inculcated, her impression on the case of adapting Montessori system to changes is an example. When she talks about spirit of creative education, she mentions about teaching children and refers to the necessity of uploading the spirit behind Montessori method. She says, 'It is the Montessori spirit we want and not so much the method- not that the method is wrong, it can be creative too- but if we stagnate and become immersed in the method, then, two hundred years hence, we will still be using those little materials and shall have become slaves to the method of forgetting the purpose for which it was invented. So, if we are true to the spirit of real education, we must make it creative.'(2004, 244)

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<sup>1</sup> Rukmini reminisces on her role in the 'revival' of Bharatanatyam. 1958,54.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> This essay is part of the *Notes for India's educational renaissance*. Undated. Considering some facts of Arundale's reference to 'kalakshetra' and not as International center for Arts and Rukmini's reference to the war, it can be narrowed to have been written and published sometime between the years 1939 and 1945 by when Arundale had passed away.

<sup>4</sup> Like the one lecture at Sangeet Natak Akademi dance seminar, 1958

<sup>5</sup> 1966 and 1976

<sup>6</sup> From Hindustan Times 14 Dec: 1944 qtd in Ramnarayan, Gowri(1984a, 17).



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<sup>7</sup> Rukmini also recounts having seen Jivaratnam's dance.(2001a,7) She was one of the Kalyani daughtes who together with Rajalakshmi performed at the annual performance of Madras Music Academy in 1931 and 1933.

<sup>8</sup> Sarada remembers the play to be an admixture of speech, movement and tableau formations where Rukmini dances beautifully with picturesque postures and movements in a white costume. As it did not involve any Bharatanatyam, she must have invariably used some ballet movements reminiscent of her earlier training in ballet and Pavlova's dying swan which she used to perform at Adyar.

<sup>9</sup> From Sellon's description of the item, it can be deduced that it is Alarippu that was presented first.

<sup>10</sup> Appeared in The Theosophist June 1936 in ed. Nachiappan (2001,36) and qtd in Ramnarayan, (1984a, 21)

<sup>11</sup> Gowri ammal started Rukmini's introduction to dance with a sabdam 'sarasijakshulu' rightway followed by adavus.(Ramnarayan 1984a,19).

<sup>12</sup> Mentioned in Ramnarayan 1984, 20.

<sup>13</sup> Meduri gives reference to quoting from 'Ramnarayan 1984,22'

<sup>14</sup> Sellon's account as qtd in Ramnarayan. 1984,21 and in ed Nachiappan and Woldring. 2001,36

<sup>15</sup> I deal with her other theories at different occasions.

<sup>16</sup> As has been discussed above, the first performance was in Dec 1935 and this performance for which Sellon has written an account is the second performance of March 1936.

<sup>17</sup> Programme brochure date to have been anytime between early 1937 to early 1939.

<sup>18</sup> Which Meduri refers to as Rukmini's 'doubling devices'

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Harp Allen,1997, has dealt with the issue of 'separation' of Rukmini Devi's work from the traditional teachers, 67-68p

<sup>20</sup> In the early 1937- after the Adyar day celebrations on 17<sup>th</sup> Feb, 1937

<sup>21</sup> Theosophical society was founded in the USA in 1875 and established in Adyar in 1886.

<sup>22</sup> Oriental literature were written by indologists like William Jones of the Asiatic society which was founded in India in 1784

<sup>23</sup> Refer to page 27

<sup>24</sup> See Meduri (2005,10)

<sup>25</sup> Tillet (1975, 766); M.Lutyens (1986, 257- 258) mention that in the then-prominent Esoteric Christology of Theosophists, the World Mother corresponded to the Virgin Mary, just as the World Teacher was the embodiment of the Christ-principle. Rukmini Arundale was to be the World Mother's "vehicle"

<sup>26</sup> See the discussion on Devadasi in the first chapter.

<sup>27</sup> There are instances where one of my classmates at Kalakshetra, an NRI, was told not to wear her favourite white practice dance saree to the college as they considered white to be not a color at all.

<sup>28</sup> See Pattabhiraman 1984,25. This was perhaps the kind of saree that Rukmini referred to as 'cheap tinsely stuff'

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<sup>29</sup> *Mundaani* of a saree is the end part which is let fall over the left shoulder. This usually consists of very intricate *zari* work. The more costly the saree, the more intricate and grand is its *zari* work.

<sup>30</sup> The Sringara dialogue was in full swing in Sangeet Natak Akademi Dance seminar, (proceedings in Bulletin 8, April 1958, p 29-30 in Nartanam Vol III. No.2 April-June 2003, p 56) where both Rukmini and Balasaraswati tried to justify their ways of depicting sringaa in dance. This argument spilled into their subsequent writings too.

<sup>31</sup> See Subramanian, Lakshmi (2006,4) She mentions that 'In 1803 Maharaja Serfoji II, the Maratta king of Tanjore known for his love of music and patronage of the arts, composed a number of marching tunes, in slow and quick movement for the Tanjore military band. These were notated in the European manner, a practice not traditionally associated with musical activity in India'. The repertoire format of Bharatanatyam was also standardized during this period. So, it will be no wonder if bagpipe that was quintessential to bands or a similar instrument found its presence in dance and its usage was validated during the period of Tanjore quartet itself or even before them.

<sup>32</sup> Qtd in Ramnarayan (1984a,29)

<sup>33</sup> See Ramnarayan (1984a,20). Chokkalingam Pillai recalls that composing dance for kritis was an innovation that his grandfather, Meenakshisundaram had brought about. 'Ananda natana prakasham being the first kriti he composed, he also did a few more though this was strongly opposed by Chokkalingam's father Ponniah Pillai who felt this deviation from sampradaya could become a bad precedent. He however feels that Rukmini devi had asked him to compose for kritis as a test of Meenakshisundaram's ability and his knowledge of Sanskrit and Telugu.

<sup>34</sup> A programme brochure of one of the earliest performances of Rukmini, the period of performance that can be said to have been between 1937 and 1939, shows the inclusion of flute provided by one T.P. Sivasankaran Pillai of Trivandrum. The other supports being provided by nattuvanar- Chokkalingam Pillai and singers of this programme- T.S. Balasubrahmanya Pillai and K.N. Dandayudapani Pillai, who were both from traditional nattuvanar families and M. Krishnamurti Pillai who provided support on mridangam. In another programme performed on September 14, 1940, there is inclusion of violin as an accompaniment most probably used for the first time in her programmes apart from the flute. Papanasam Sivan is credited as providing 'Vocal music', a term that is different from the 'singers' in the earlier performance. Here, Chokkalingam Pillai is nattuvanar, flute is by C. Balakrishna Raj, mridangam by Chellappa Ayyar and Violin by Anantarama Ayyar.

<sup>35</sup> See Rukmini Devi 1958 where she refers to the duration of a Sadir repertoire

<sup>36</sup> See kersenboom-Story, Saskia (1986) for the details of various platforms of performance of the arts of the devadasis and its structure.

<sup>37</sup> See comments in The Andhra Patrika, March 16h 1936, Indian Times 17<sup>th</sup> March 1936. Comments on Rukmini Devi and Kalakshetra

<sup>38</sup> See comments in Swarajya April 11, 1936. Comments on Rukmini Devi and Kalakshetra.

<sup>39</sup> See Mayakoothan II.1996,10

<sup>40</sup> Mentioned in Chandrasekharan. K.1983

<sup>41</sup> See Venugopalan S.V. 2001,27

<sup>42</sup> See Programme brochure 1.

<sup>43</sup> See Akbar Shah.for details on classification of nayika. 91-105

<sup>44</sup> Interpretation of Bharata-Natya by S.Subramanya Sastri. See programme brochure 1.

<sup>45</sup> See Programme brochure 2

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<sup>46</sup> Subramaniam 1995 provides a discussion on bhakti sringara and evolution of pada.

<sup>47</sup> Chandrasekharan.K.1983 qts that Rukmini expresses happiness at conducting the arangetral of A.Sarada without any help of traditional nattuvanars or singers. she considered this an important achievement as it entailed a 'complete separation' of their work 'from the traditional dance teachers'

<sup>48</sup>See The Souvenir book.1940,7

<sup>49</sup> See De Zoete Beryl. 1953,200.

<sup>50</sup>See Programme brochure 3

<sup>51</sup> See Programme brochure 4

<sup>52</sup> See Ramnarayan, Gowri. 1984,19 where Chokkalingam Pillai mentions that Meenakshisundaram Pillai had brought in the innovation of composing dance for kritis, '*Ananda natana prakasham*' being the first of the few kritis that he had taught Rukmini Devi.

<sup>53</sup> Chandrasekharan (1983) quotes Rukmini who speaks proudly about the complete separation of their work from the traditional dance teachers as she accused them to be 'a small clan of people who have never believed it possible for anybody else to conduct a dance performance but themselves' and as people who used to think that 'except the usual class of people no one would be able to perform a dance'. She challenges them with her remark that 'now there are many girls from good families who are excellent dancers'.

<sup>54</sup> See Programme brochure 3

<sup>55</sup> See Compilation of songs (55)

<sup>56</sup> Qtd in a booklet by All India Arundale centenary committee. (1978,4).

<sup>57</sup> See Taylor 1992,262 qtd in Bird, Diane.

<sup>58</sup> Pandit S.Subramania Sastry, was a theosophist and Director of studies at Kalakshetra before 1941. S. Sarada was his grand daughter.

<sup>59</sup> Note on *Bharata Natya* in Compilation of songs.p1-2

<sup>60</sup> Compilation, Rukmini's thoughts on Kalakshetra p6

<sup>61</sup> See Gaston (1991,95) where she views this as a characteristic of 'invented tradition'.

<sup>62</sup> Coomaraswamy (1913) critiques western aestheticians like Vincent Smith, Maskell and Birdwood in his *Indian images with many arms*.

<sup>63</sup> In this context, it is essential to consider some of the findings and observations made by Subramaniam (1995,4) on the issue of identity of art and religion. He argues that the relation between art and religion was dialectical, being governed by changing socio-historical patterns of confrontation, compromise and appropriation. He says that till the 6<sup>th</sup> century (from sangam till early post-sangam age), music and dance had strong secular orientations 'when poetic literature was totally secure without even prayer songs to preface the sangam anthologies.' But with the emergence of bhakti poets who sang songs of personal love towards a deity and glorified the kings respectively in their adaptations of *aham* and *aattrupadai* genres of the sangam literature, the hindu temple deity was addressed as *Raja*, thus making religion- art association a political convenience

<sup>64</sup> Qtd in The souvenir book.1940.p 4.

<sup>65</sup> Bharata Natya The Complete Art, undated.in Ramani ed (2004,27)

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- <sup>66</sup>Programme note on Krishnamari Kuravanji
- <sup>67</sup> Programme note on Matsya and Kurma avataras.
- <sup>68</sup> Programme note on Kannappar Kuravanji
- <sup>69</sup> From Bharata Natya, The Complete Art, Rukmini's lecture at Kalakshetra. Ramani 2004,26.
- <sup>70</sup> In 'Bharatanatyam', Marg, Vol-34,No-3,p38
- <sup>71</sup> Ibid, p40
- <sup>72</sup> The Spirit of Art. Rukmini's lecture at Kalakshetra, undated.in Ramani ed (2004,118)
- <sup>73</sup> See Rukmini Devi (1976, 20 ) where she claims she was the first to rename Sadir as Bharatanatyam
- <sup>74</sup> Jacob Epstein(1880-1959) was an American born sculptor who worked chiefly in Britain where he pioneered modern sculpture. He revolted against ornate, pretty art, he made bold often harsh and massive forms of bronze or stone. His was avant-garde in concept and style.
- <sup>75</sup> Kalakshetra Prospectus 1964-65. 26pp'
- <sup>76</sup> See Dhananjayan (2005,109), a senior dancer from kalakshetra who joined the institution in 1953 recounts this.
- <sup>77</sup> *Bhishma* was produced and performed by Rukmini in the year 1937.
- <sup>78</sup> See Sankara Menon's speech (1976,13) where he narrates how one by one all the institutions which till then functioned under the umbrella of Theosophical society including Kalakshetra weaving department, Arundale Montessori training centre and Besant Theosophical school were moved to Tiruvannamipur after the society wanted Damodar and Besant gardens for its own purposes.
- <sup>79</sup> C. Balagopalan, a retd teacher of Bharatanatyam and Kathakali at Kalakshetra clarifies this stance. Personal communication dt 09-03-2006
- <sup>80</sup> The other two being moments of maneuver and arrival.
- <sup>81</sup> Introductory note on Kalakshetra. 32<sup>nd</sup> Art festival booklet
- <sup>82</sup> Chokkalingam Pillai remarks that "as long as Meenakshisundaram Pillai remained a Kalakshetra, nothing was done contrary to tradition. No dance-dramas only solo dancing of Bharatanatyam." qtd in Ramnarayan (1984a, 19)

## Chapter-3

### **Perspectives on Rukmini Devi's Dance drama: Dance- qualified and Dancer- quantified.**

#### **3.1 Analysis of portions of dance-drama: *Sabari Moksham***

Rukmini Devi's *Sabari Moksham* choreographed in the year 1965, has been taken for analysis. This includes interpretive discussion on the technique of the following scenes: *Panchapsaras*, *Jatayu Patrapravesham* and *Surpanakha patrapravesham*.

*Sabari Moksham* is taken from *Aranya Kandam*, the third book of Valmiki Ramayana that deals with the abduction of Sita by Ravana.

##### **3.1.1. Panchapsaras**

Scene-1:

Panchapsaras is the first scene of Sabari Moksham. Sri Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are in the precincts of the hermitage of sage Agastya on the banks of a beautiful lake. They hear sounds of music and dance coming from the lake and ask a disciple of Agastya the reason for this. He tells them that there is a sage living under the waters of the lake for whose delectation divine beings dance under the lake. They see these Apsaras (divine dancers) dance<sup>1</sup>.

The above summary is in accordance with an older version where the drama starts with the entry of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana. It had later been changed to start directly with the panchapsaras scene where the apsaras are seen dancing followed by the entry of all the three protagonists.

Panchapsara sarovara, the first scene in Sabari Moksham the fourth in the Ramayana series of Rukmini Devi is performed by a group of five dancers (who will be henceforth mentioned as *A, B, C, D* and *E*). This dance drama based on Valmiki's Ramayana slokas in Sanskrit has music composed by Mysore Vasudevacharyar, who taught music at Kalakshetra. Panchapsara scene opens after the usual preliminary invocatory slokas sung in five ragas. These slokas in praise of Ganesa, Valmiki, Hanuman, Ramayana and Sri Rama are sung in *nattai, gaula, arabhi, sri* and *varali* ragas respectively. The usage of these *ghana panchaka* ragas typical of Tyagaraja's pancharatna kritis of carnatic music seem to emphasise the grandeur and importance of the Ramayana epic that unfolds. Panchapsara sarovara is described as a lovely lake, a creation of the sage Mandakarni. As the story goes, five apsaras (water nymphs) were sent by the gods to entertain the sage and distract him from his powerful penance. The sounds of drums, instruments and music of the unseen dance emanated from underneath the lake where the sage was witnessing the performance of the beautiful apsaras.

The first line of verse sung opens to misty environs consisting of creepers, shrubs and trees. These are hazy outlines painted against the cyclorama on which is projected a blue- green light that combines to create an ambience of a forest enveloped with mist against a watery translucence of the lake. The back ground and gradually the stage is enveloped by this light creating an ethereal feel. Focus then shifts to the (front) stage as diffused light starts filling in and dancers appear from the wings with the beginning of the swaras- M , D M G G R..... Five female dancers as apsaras are dressed in off-white skirts with their blouse, *pallu* and back-seat in varying hues of rose, pink, navy blue, light green and blue-green (viridian) as Ramnarayan (2003) says, 'the costumes in sea and moss green, lotus pink and a pool deep purple adding to the illusion' of the lake where they dance. The song is set to misra chapu in madhyama kala. As this is a nritta oriented scene, the use of this particular tala and laya

acquires significance as it gives a better base to shift to druta kala whenever required.

*Ragam- Sriranjani*

*Talam- Misrachapu.*

Idam panchaapsaro naama tataakam saarvakaalikam

M , D M G G R || S R G M , N D || M D N G R , D ||  
N G R N D R S || G R , S N D R || S , N D M D M ||  
, G R S , N D , || N G R G N D N || S ; N G R S ||  
N D M D N R S || , N D M M , G || R S N S R G M ||

M , D M ta ka ja nu kit a tom N D || M D ta ja num , Ku kum tari N D R S  
||  
M , D M G G R S R G M , N D || M D N G R , D N G R N D R S ||

Da nam , ta ri ta R S , N D M Da nam || , kit a ta , N D N G R G da na ta ||  
G R , S N D R S , N D M D M || , G R S N D N G R G N D N ||

Jam ; N G R S N D ta kun ta ri jam , || da na jam M , G R S ta din gina  
tom , ||  
S ; N G R S N D M D N R S , || N D M M , G R S N S R G M ||

Ta tah kartum tapo vighnam Devei sarvairniyojitaah ||

Pradhaanaapsarasah pancha vidhyuchalita varchasaha ||

D ; N ; D M G , R S , N D , N || S ; R G M , D N D , S N D M N ||

D ; N , S R G M G R S , N D N || R S , N D , D M , G R N S R G M ||

Takajanutam, that, that, takadimi tam, Dheem tam Kita dhanata ||

Jamtaritakatam kukuntari kitatom tomtatakuntarita ||

Jamtaritakatam kukuntari kitatom Tom ta tadimi takuntarita  
dinginatom ||

Taasaam sankreedamaanaanaamesha vaaditranihsvanah

Shrooyate bhooshanonmishro geeta shabdo manoharah ||

**TABLE-1**

Set. no	Song	Kanakku/ Rhythm		Adavus, Important feet movements, Sira, Hasta, Greeva, Drishti bheda and arm movements <sup>2</sup>
I	M , D M G G R S R G M , N D M D N G R ,	Takatakita-4		A & B: kunchita bhramari anticlockwise; teiyateihi C: teiyateihi; ekapada bhramari D & E: motita uthplavana- sideways
II	G R , S N D R S , N D M D M , G R S ,	Takadimi-2		A, B, C, D and E: Usi
		A & D:	Takita taka;	Utplavana (front and back)
			Taka;	Vegini backwards
			Takita taka;	_____ Tateitam diteitam (muzhumandi, garudam, bhramari)
			_____ Takitatakita;	Vegini (front)
		C, E & B	takita	Theermana adavu _____ (kitatakatarikitatom)
			Takita takita-2	Uthplavana (front); teididitei
			Takadimi takita	Ayata (stamp and moving back-kuttana)
III	N, D, N, G R G N D N	Takadimi takatakita		Teiyateihi

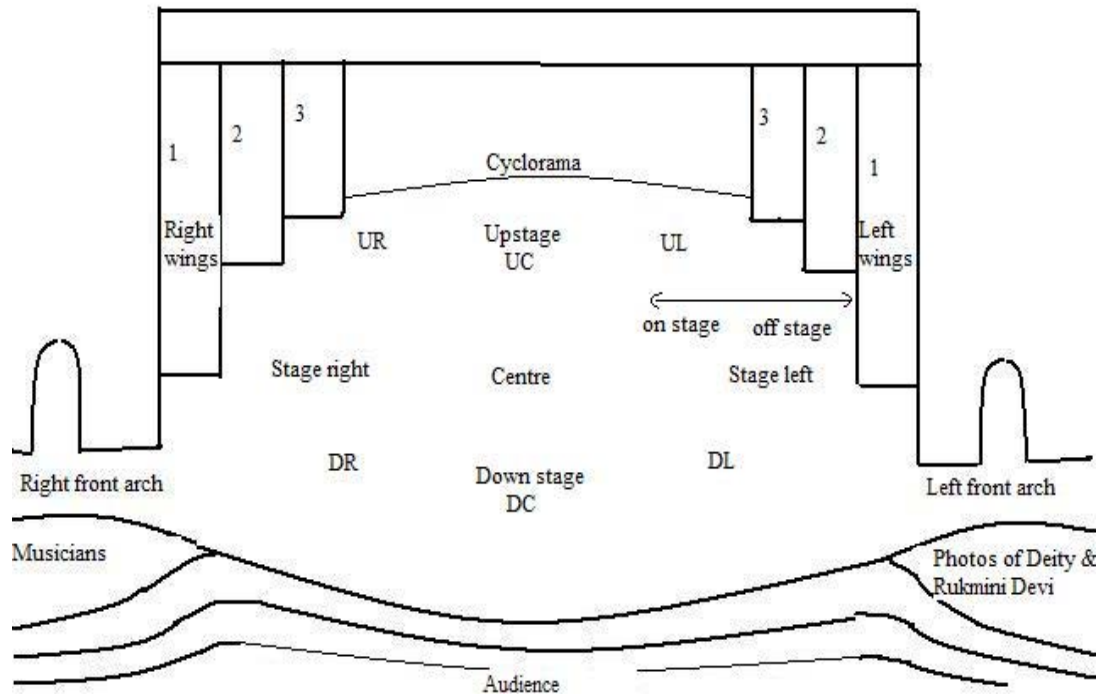


	S ; N G R S N D M D N R S N	Takadimi-4	Usi adavu
IV	D M M , G R S N <sub>i</sub> S R G M	Takatakita;	<i>A &amp; D</i> : motita utplavana sideways
			<i>C, E &amp; B</i> : kartari utplavana
		Takadimi;	<i>A &amp; D</i> : 2 <sup>nd</sup> tateitam nattadavu(2 <sup>nd</sup> half)- levels- sama, muzhumandi & sama
			<i>C, E &amp; B</i> : kartari utplavana
		Takita	<i>A,B, C, D, E</i> : teididitei ————— (kitatakatarikitatom)
V	Druta kala M , D M ta ka ja nu kit a tom ( M , D M G G R S R G M ,)	Takadimi-3	<i>A &amp; D</i> : kuditu mettadavu; diditei-2 (preritam, ayatam)
			<i>C, E &amp; B</i> : diditei-2 (preritam- ayatam- katakamukam to alapadma; teyyateihi
	N D M D ta ja num , (N D M D N G R ,)	Takatakita takita	Motita utplavana; diditei
		Takadimi takadimi	Tattimettu (gesturing instruments)
	Ku kum tari N D R S (D N G R N D R S)	Takadimi takadimi	Alternate legs thrown front; diditei deiditei
VI	Da nam , ta ri ta R S , N D M ( G R , S N D R S , N D M)	Takita-2	<i>A &amp; D</i> : tattimettu <i>C,B &amp; E</i> : motita utplavana(sides)
		Takita takita	<i>A &amp; D</i> : Motita utplavana (backwards) <i>C,B &amp; E</i> : motita utplavana (front)
	Da nam, kit a ta (D M , G R S)	Takita-2	Muzhumandi; ayata with one leg thrown at an angle above

			ground (5 <sup>th</sup> ta tei tam position)
VII	, N D N G R G da na ta jam;(N D N G R G N D N S ;)	Ta ; takadimi-3	Usi- vegini
	N G R S N D	Takita takita	A & D:chalana
	ta kun ta ri jam , da na jam (M D N R S , N D M)	Takita-3	A & D:Utplavanam; theermana adavu-2 (kitatakadarikitatom)
	M , G R S ta din gina tom , ( M , G R S N S R G M )	Takita takita takadimi	A & D:Tattimettu (with vegini off from stage)
VIII	N G R S N D ta kun ta ri jam , da na jam M , G R S ta din gina tom , ( N G R S N D M D N R S , N D M M , G R S N S R G M)	takadimi	C, B & E: Chalana (walk back together with gestures of instruments)
IX	Ta tah kartum tapo vighnam	Takita takatakita-2	B, C & E: tattimettu
	Devei sarvairniyojitaah	Takadimi- 2;takadimi takita; dimi	Kartari utplavana (sides); vegini (with self round to change positions); diditei
	Pradhaanaapsara sah pancha vidhyuchalita varchasaha	Takadimi-3; takatakita-2; takita-2	Tattimettu;kartari utplavana (front); diditei-2- entire sequence repeated twice
X	Madyama kala D ; N ; D M G , R	Takita-2	C,B & E: kartari utplavana A & D: diditei (tatti); diditei (natti) (entry from left)
		takatakita	A,B,C,D E: ekapada bhramari
	S , N D,N,S	Takita takita	C,B E: tattimettu A&D: diditei (tatti; diditei (natti)

	; R G M , D N D ,	<i>C,B,E</i> :takatakita-2	Teididitei-2
		<i>A &amp; D</i> : (druta kala) ————— takatakitatakataki ta;-2	Teididitei (natti)-2; kunchita bhramari
	S N D M N	<i>C,B,E</i> : takatakita	Teididitei-2
		<i>A &amp; D</i> : drutakala ————— Takadimi takatakita (ta)	Kuttanam; theermana adavu (druta kala- takitatakadarikitatom)
XI	D ; N ,S R G M G R S , N D N R S , N D , D, M , G R N,S R G M	Takita takadimi takadimi-2 ; takita taka ; takita taka	<i>A,B,C,D,E</i> together come to a circular formation- round fling of one leg, sama chalanam ; motita utplavana (sides) ; theermana adavu
XII	Takajanutam, that, that, takadimi tam,	Takadimi-4	<i>B, A, C, E</i> : come around <i>D</i> -one feet sama, other kunchita outstretched, bhramara hands <i>D</i> :motita mandala; parshva suchi- twice
	Dheem tam	————— Takita takita	<i>B, A, C, E</i> - chalana <i>D</i> : motita mandala; sama
	Kita dhanata	takatakita	<i>B,A,C,E</i> : continue chalana <i>D</i> : usi
XIII	Jamtaritakatam kukuntari kitatom	————— Takadimi-4	<i>D,B,A,E</i> : diditei-4 katakamuka and alapadma outstretched <i>C</i> : front motita utplavana; diditei; muzhumandi to sama
	tomtatakuntarita	takitatakitataka	————— Kartari utplavana (sides); diditei
	Jamtaritakatam kukuntari kitatom	Takadimi-2; takadimitakadimi	Throw alternate legs forward from sama; kuttanam on kunchita

	Tom ta tadimi takuntarita dinginitom	Takita takadimi takita takita	<i>C,E,B</i> : kartari utplavana (sides), motita utplavana (front); tei tei, diditei <i>A,D</i> : (2 <sup>nd</sup> tateitam 2 <sup>nd</sup> half) muzhumandi to garudam mandala to bramari; teididitei
XIV	Tasaam sankreedā maanaanaamesh a vaditranihsvanah	Takita takadimi	<i>A</i> : kunchita bhramari- self rotation <i>E,B</i> - utpluta (motita) bending torso <i>D,C</i> - teiyateihi; ekapada bhramari with anga bhramari of torso



**Fig:6 Geography of Kalakshetra Proscenium stage<sup>3</sup>**

From the above description table, an analysis of performance and presentation technique has been arrived at.

In Set I (table-1), five dancers make their entry from different wings: *A* & *B* from left front arch, *D* & *E* from before third right wing, *C* from before left third wing (Image-1). It can be observed from the description table that their movements are not identical but there is similarity in the emphasis on the usage of torso- its gentle spin and sway both in *bhramari* and *uthplavana*. These are similar to *mei* adavus that are done as preliminary adavus which prepare the body for the more strenuous *korvais* in items like *jathiswaram* or *thillana*. In this phrase too, the execution of these *mei* adavus which are gentle *bhramari*-s and *uthplavana*-s help in three ways: being *mei* exercises that prepare the dancers for the succeeding *korvai*-s and *theermanam*-s, these adavus are executed in motion mainly to cover horizontal space- a significant aspect of group choreography on a proscenium. The lightness in placement of their feet and gentleness in the sway of torso indicate a buoyant feel. Simultaneously, they evoke a sense of small swirls or ripples on the surface of the lake.

In contrast to the above, in Set II (table-1), the dancers break into a *usi* where they criss-cross the stage and form a trapezium (Image 2). Momentum gathers from this stage on wherein subsequent movements with powerfully swift *uthplavana* and *vegini* bring *A* & *D* alternately intercrossing *C,E* and *B*. This opposite flow can be taken as a simple aesthetic pattern which provides a sense of heightened vitality. But, the rapidness of *A* and *D* and oppositional action seem to also suggest turbidity within the lake. Following this, simple *kuttana* is used by *C,E* and *B* to go back with suggestive gestures of *mridangam*, *talam* and *veena*. This clever usage of light feet movements in *tattimettu* bring focus to their *hastas* which depict the musical instruments they carry. From their entry in Set I till the end of this set which ends in a simple *teididitei*, there is conspicuous usage of criss-cross rhythms initially paired between *AB*, *CD* and *E* and then between *AD* and *CEB*. This juxtaposes similarity and variation. The differences in action tend to get highlighted as there is

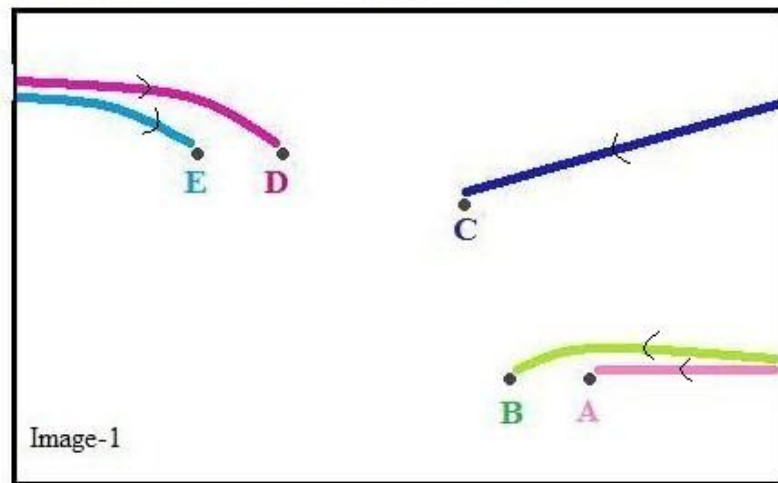
a complementary but relative speed, changing body levels in action (sama, aramandi, garuda staanaka) and occasional oppositional and interlocking stream of movements (as can be observed from table and Images 3 and 4). At the same time the kind of adavus executed blends in perfectly with the varying rhythms creating certain vibrancy.

From these positions (Image 5), there is a gradual parting of *A,D* and *C,E,B* in opposite ways (SetIII-table-1). Together, the dancers take a gentle curve and move evenly to the rhythm first with a *teiyateihi* in *takadimi takatakita* continued with *usi* in *takadimi*. Pattern-2 (Image-26) gives a lucid picture of the floor pattern of the five dancers where each one of them takes an individual parabolic path to move through a diagonal trapezium, which is a transitory position, to reach a pentagon formation (Image 6 and 7). One thing that is visible throughout this scene is the fact that the trapezium whether normal, inverted or diagonally placed becomes a design motif from where different patterns begin, end or is transitory (Images- 2,3,4,6,7,8,10). This repetitive motif is significant in two ways:

1. It acts as an intermediary position linking different dynamic patterns.
2. The five dancers are placed in such a way that their positioning gives ample scope for emphasis as a group and also as individual entities on proscenium.

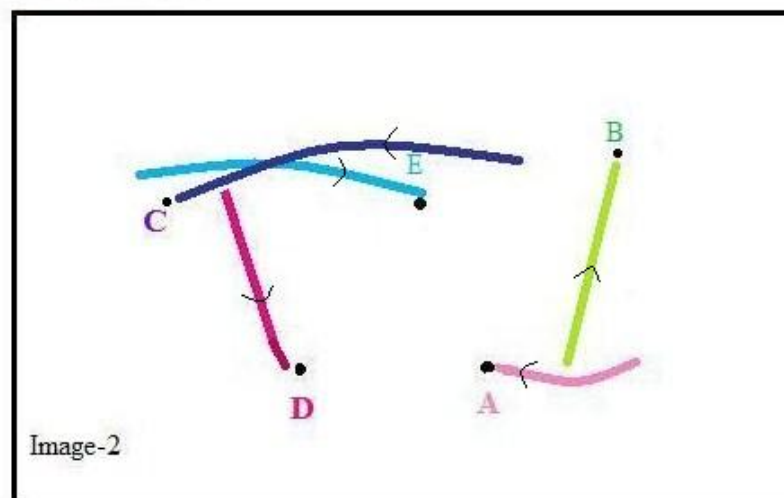
Set-I

M,DMGGRSRGM,NDMDNGR,

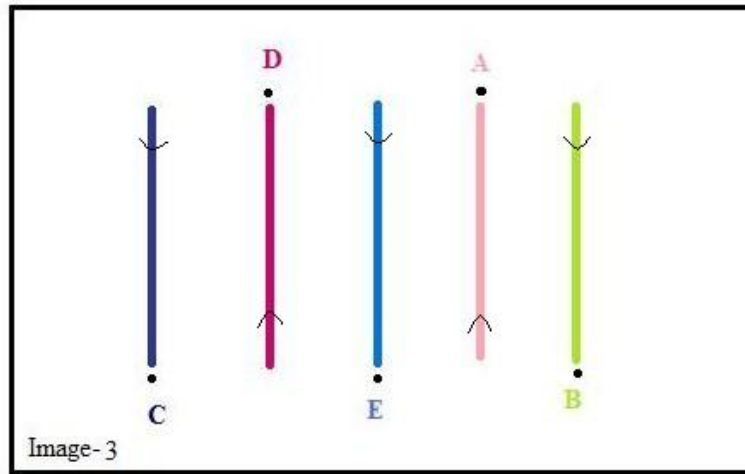


Set-II (Images 2,3,4)

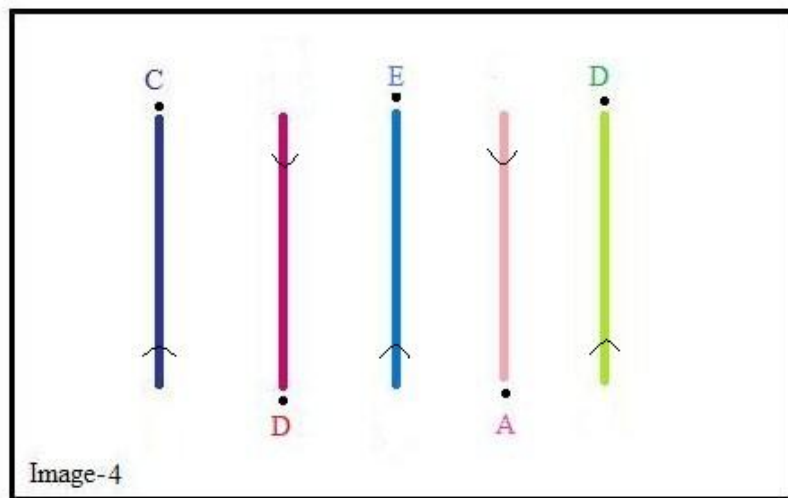
DNGRNDRS



GR, SNDRS, NDM



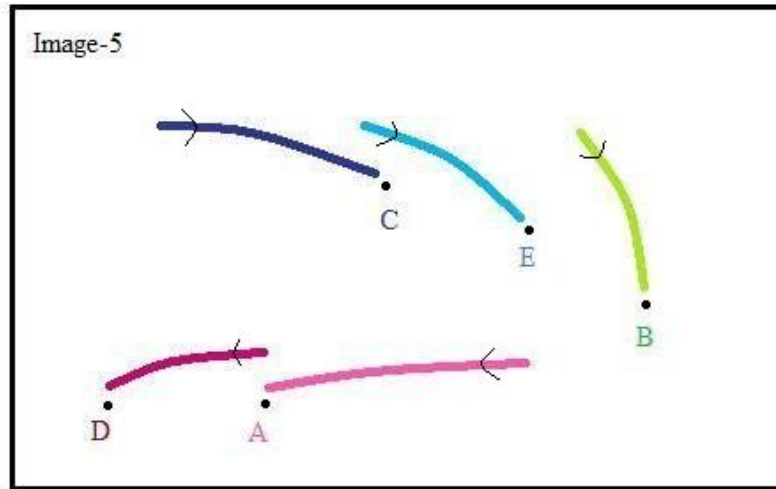
D M , G R S ,



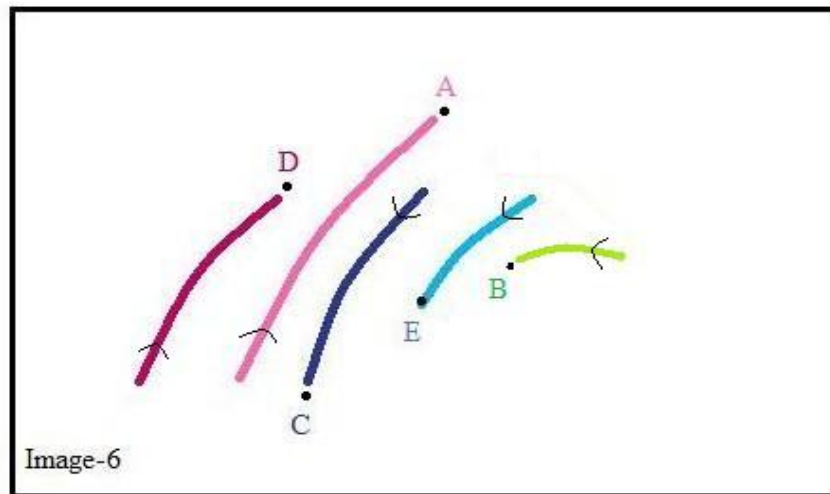


Set- III (Images 5,6,7)

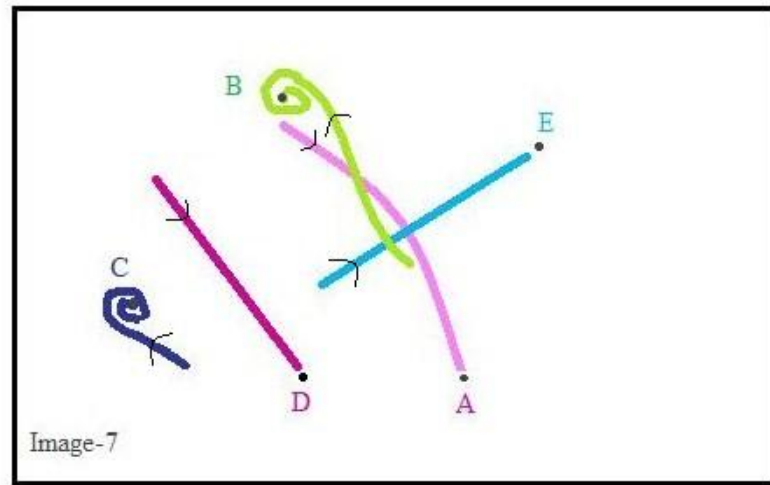
N D N G R G N D N



S ; N G R S N



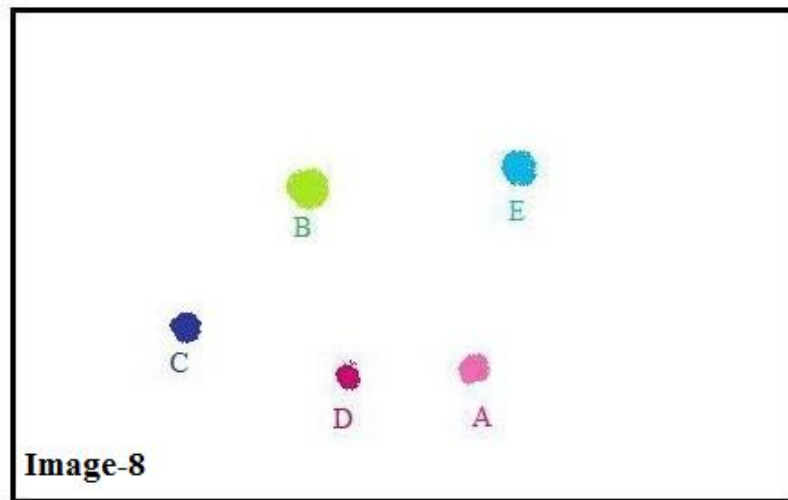
DMDNRS, N



**Fig: 7**  
**Panchapsaras scene**

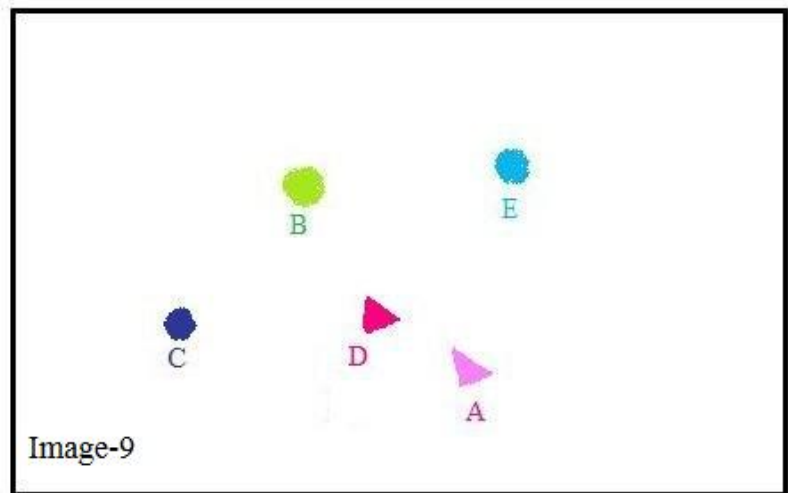
Set-IV (Image-8)

D M M , G R S N S R G



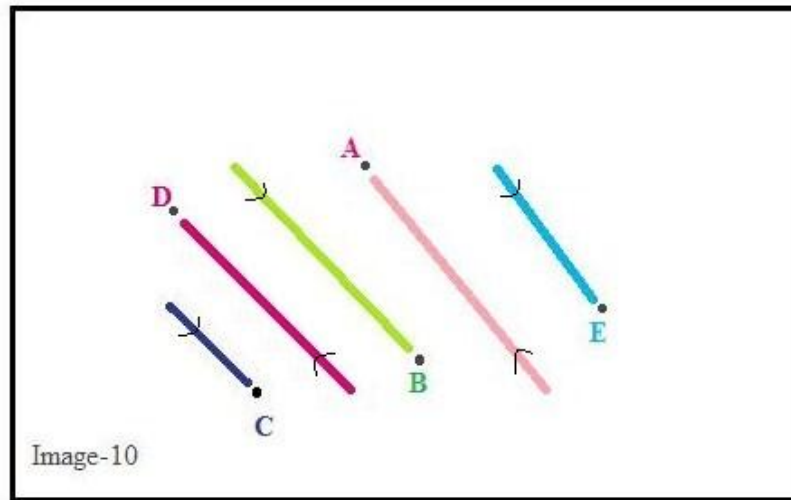
Set-V (Image-9)

Druta kala: M , D M ta ka jam



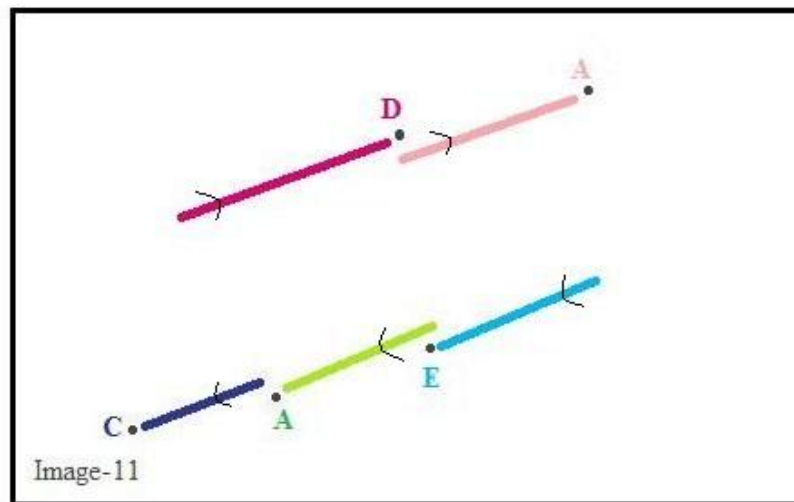
Set- VI (Image 10)

Danam ta rita...



Set VII (Image 11)

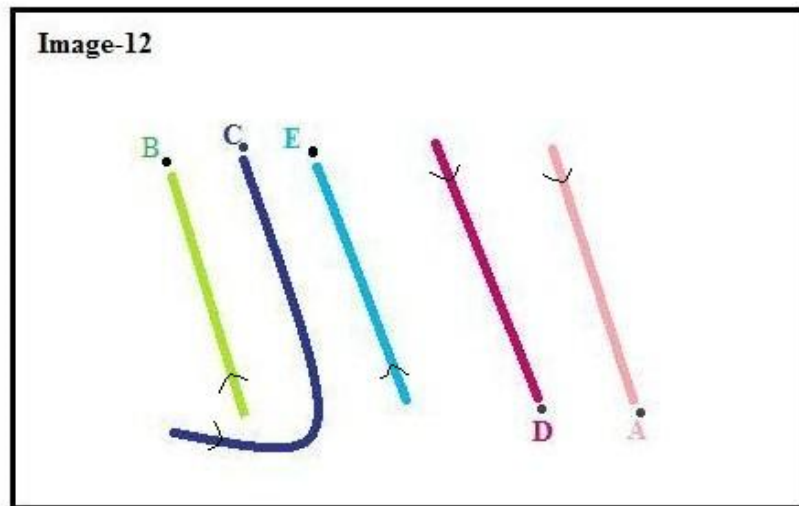
, N D N G R G ....





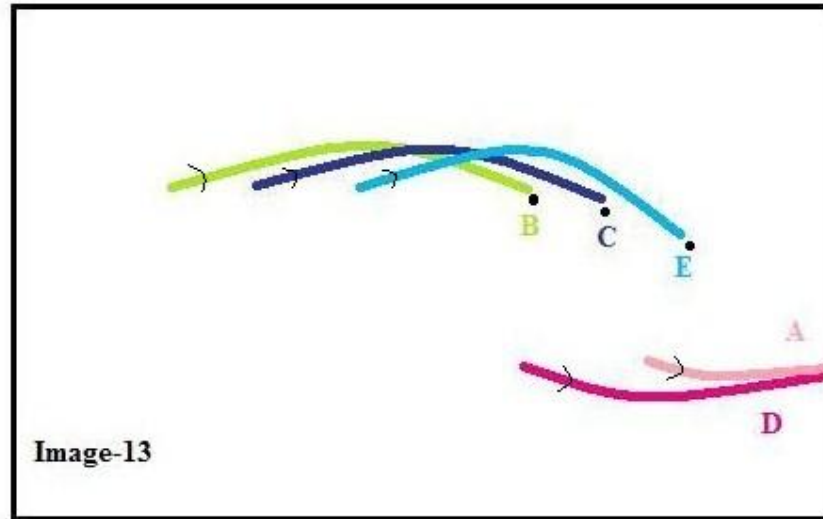
**Fig: 8**  
**Panchapsaras scene**

Set-VIII (Image12)  
N G R G S N D...

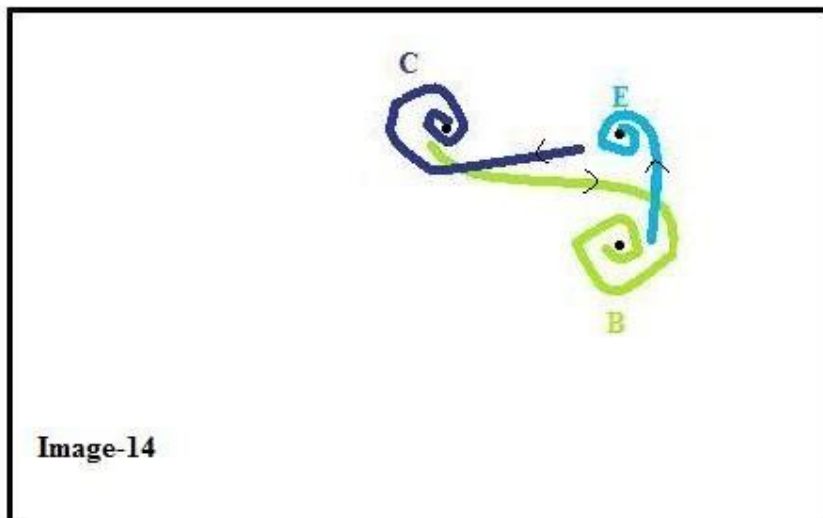


Set IX (Image 13,14,15)

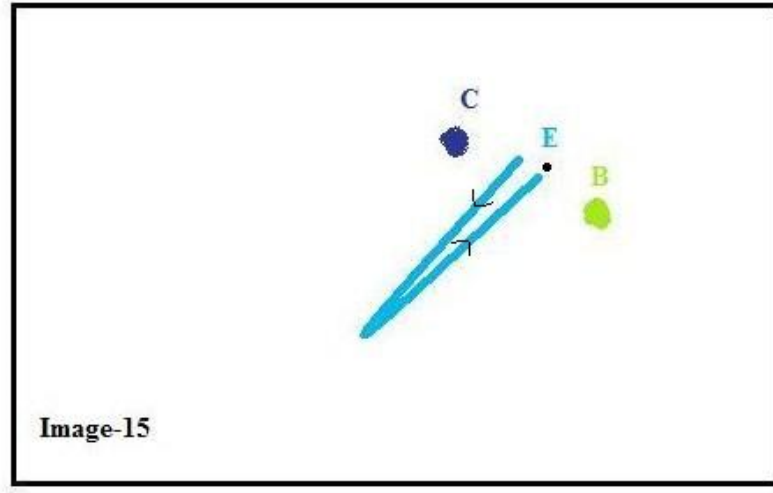
Tatra...



Vyojitham..

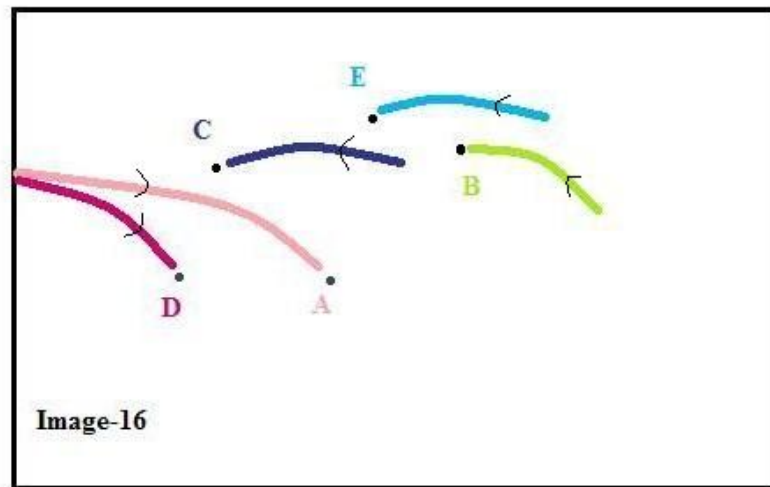


Pradaanaam...

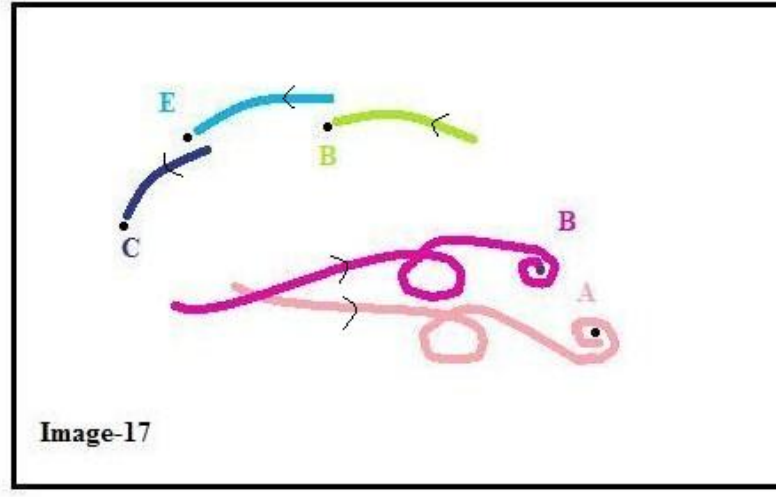


Set-X (Images 16,17)

Madhyama kala: D ; N ; D M G , R

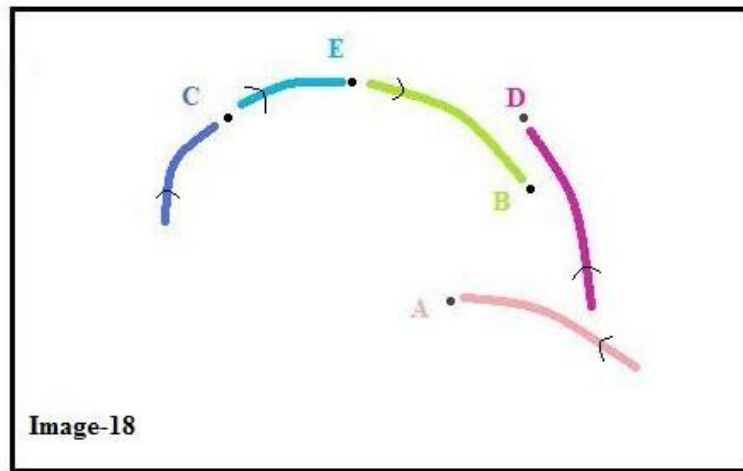


Druta kala: S , N D N S ; R G M , D M D S N D M N



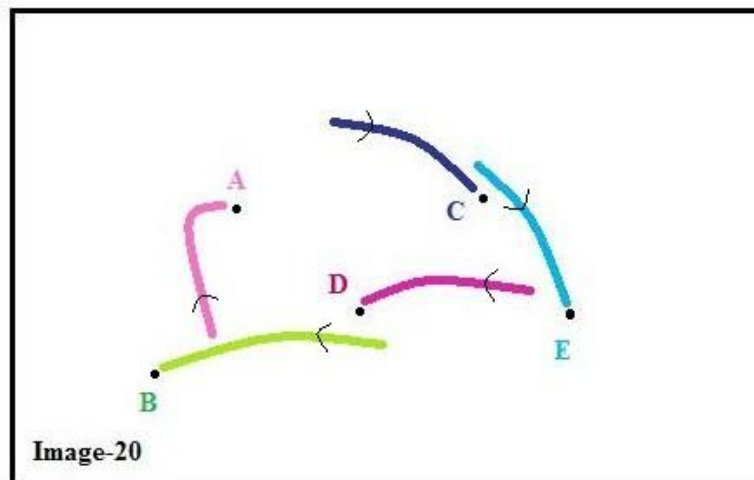
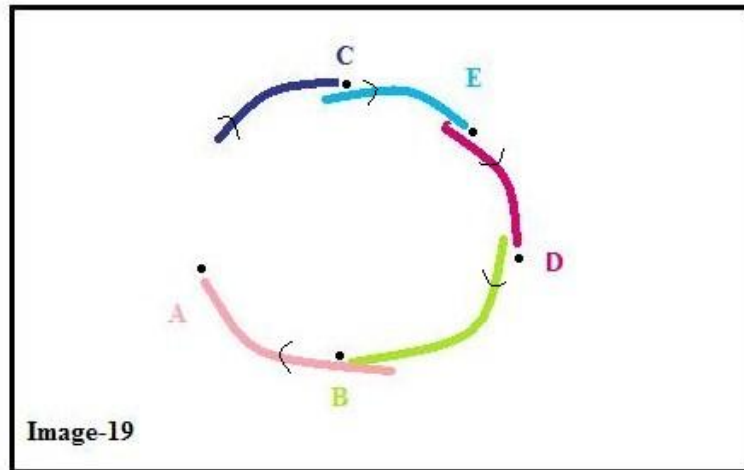
Set XI ( Images 18,19,20)

Madhyama kala: D ; N , S R G M G R





S, N D N R S, N D,



Set-XII (Images 21,22)

Druta kala: takajanutaam...

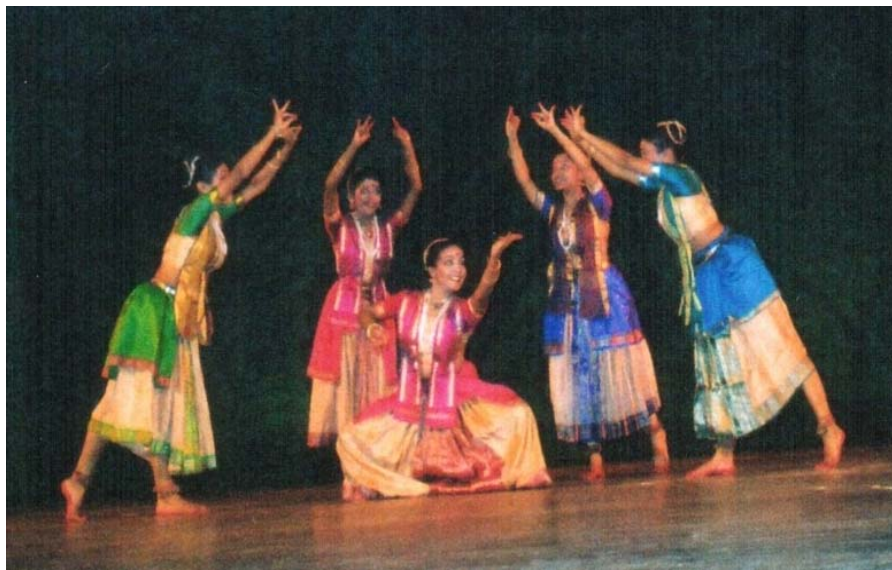
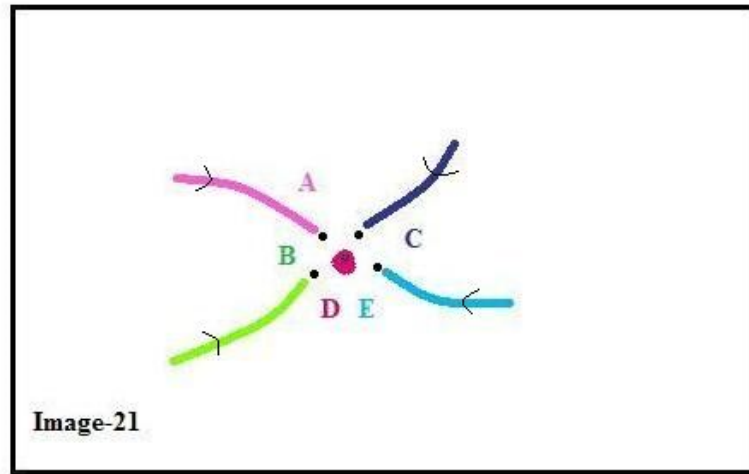
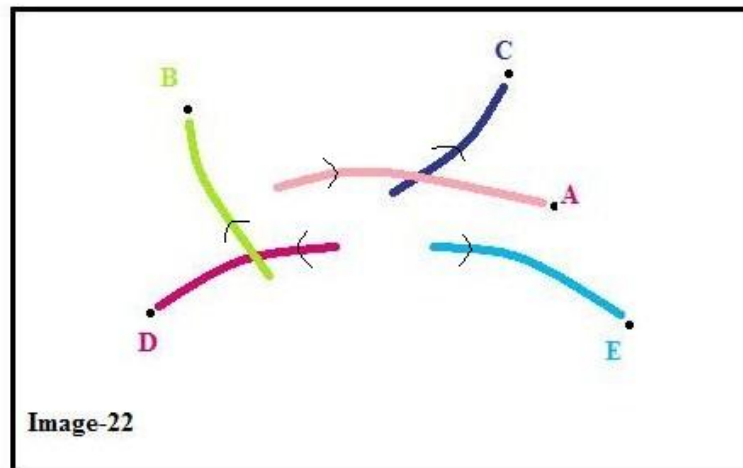


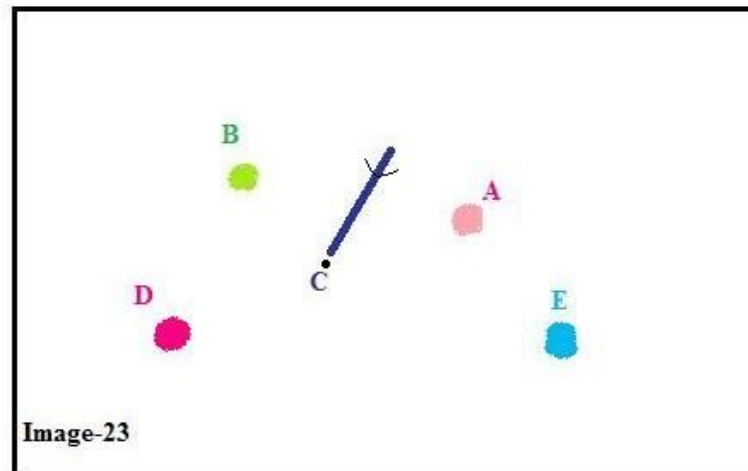
Fig: 9  
Panchapsaras scene

Dheem taam

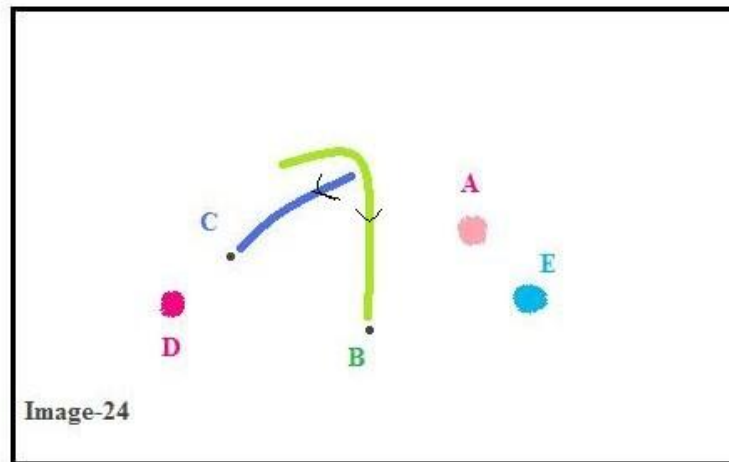


Set-XIII (Images 23,24)

Jam tari taka tom.....

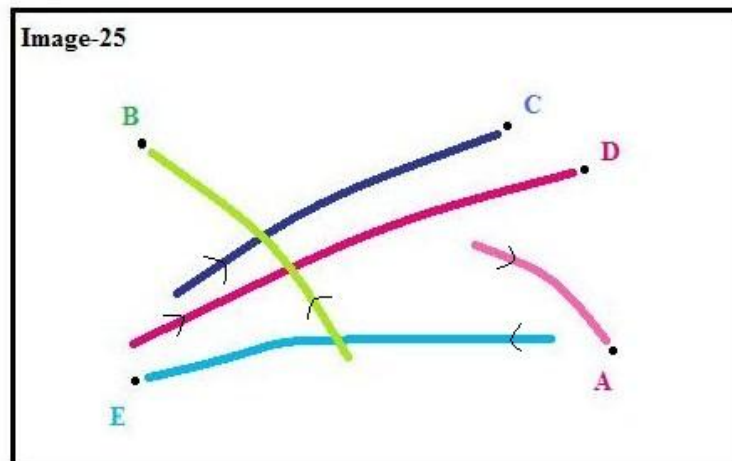


Tom ta takunta..

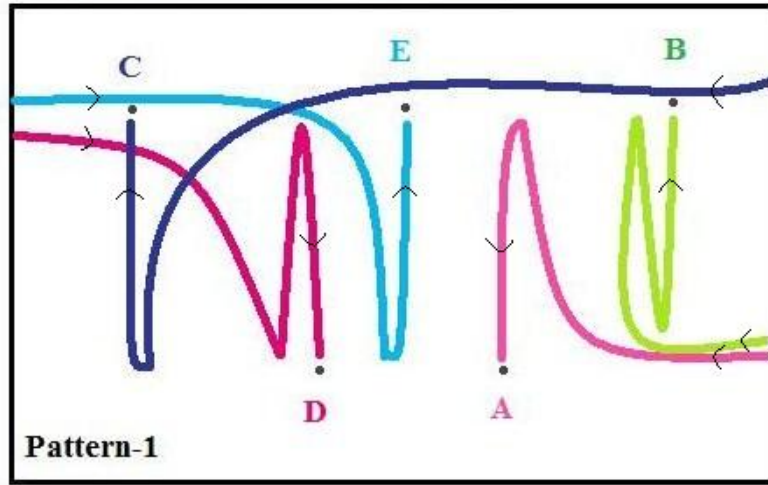


Set-XIV (Image 25)

Taasam sankreeda.

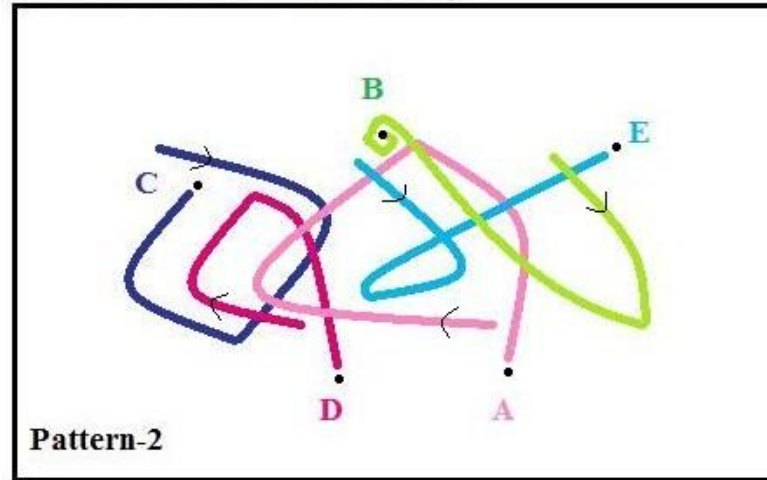


**M, DM GGR .....DM, GRS,**



**Image-26**

**NDNGRG.....DMDNRS, N**



**Image-27**

A significant move which can be noticed in the Set IV and Set VI is the prominent usage of uthplavanas, both motita and kartari, that create a sort of buoyant feel which seems like a virtual rush of ebb and flow (Image 10). Here again the movements of pairs A and D and C,E and B shift between cross rhythms and even rhythms. There is an increase in tempo from madhyama to druta kala from the Set V onwards.

The formation of Set VII, as can be seen in Image 11, has *A* and *D* move alongside Upstage Centre when concurrently *C,B* and *E* move parallel but in opposite direction towards Downstage Right. They draw apart executing a fling of the right and then left leg with outstretched arms, an inclined body and a raised chin that maintains the line of the extended leg. This particular adavu exudes a majestic charm and flamboyancy that is evidently felt from the beginning of the scene and which stays throughout. From here, *A and D* move diagonally together towards the Downstage Left in a rapid druta pace whereas *C,B and E* move parallel but backwards in a madhyama kala chalana. Symmetry between uneven pairs is prominent here.

The Set IX has an interesting mix of floor patterning. As can be seen from the image-13, *A and D* run off stage through the front arch and *C,E and B* take centerstage. They play their instruments and dance to its tune. A typical triangular formation (Image-14) and an interchange of positions within this pattern using aerial kartari uthplavana coupled with swift vegini and a turn- around gives an ethereal touch of lightness that the heavenly apsaras bring to their dance. A stark contrast is the next pattern where linearity is highlighted with kuttana through tattimettu and ayata kuttana. Though the arm and feet movements are simple, they seem to distinctly convey an earthly heaviness, a contrast to the previous phrase. From showing the motions of the lake and the movements of the water nymphs, there is a sudden shift through which emphasising on the role of apsaras as the dancer with accompaniments where *C, B and E* becomes dancers and the remaining, the audience. Though limited to moving forward and backwards diagonally in tattimettu, the movement of *E* shows an effort by display, with a raised arm in pralamba hasta and left in dola flanked by *C* and *B* as her accompanists playing the mridangam and veena. This display of performance within a performance or dance within a dance shows the role of the dancer within a group in the already unfolding dance drama. This is a technique that Rukmini Devi uses to

focus dancers in a group and to bring in group dances either in the form of thillana-s or daruvu-s or otherwise in to the narrative of a dance-drama.

This is followed by a shift to madhyama kala in Set X with the entry of *A and D* from right second wing (Image-16). *C, E and B* disperse and move to upper right of the stage whereas *A and D* turn circles in druta kala to the down left thereby occupying the two opposite ends of the stage. In Set-X, bramari-s (ekapada and kunchita) and diditei-s are majorly used to represent the changing pace, rise and fall of rhythm as well as to cover space and reach their positions. The dancers move with perfect poise along circular path, as they progress smoothly and succinctly in a clockwise direction (Images 18 and 19). The symmetry of synchronized fling and measured chalana brings in a feeling of purported ease and calmness. With a motita uthplavana they scatter from the circle in different directions and get back to their initial trapezium formation (Image 21)

For the next line in druta kala (Set XII) the dancers who had dispersed come together to the centre again and position around *D* performs in motita mandala (Image-21). Interesting here are the levels between *D* in muzhumandi and *B, A, C and E* who are in sama levels. *B, A, C and E* stand with bhramara hasta arms outstretched and their glance- anuvritta drishti- follow the movement of their wrists-up and down. It produces the effect of water droplets falling on *D*. We may also presume that *D* is a water lily or lotus with other dancers surrounding it as bees or honey birds hovering around a full bloomed flower. They then again disperse to their positions with opening alapadma arms that suggest the profuseness of flowers around (Image-22).

In the next Set XIII, there is interchange of positions between *C and B* who alternately come to the centre stage. All through this, *D, A and E* keep their positions but are continuously in movement (Images-23,24). Following this, all of them move to stage extremities (Image-25) with

different torso moves in the same way that they made their entry- *A* doing a kunchita bhramari or self rotation with bent knees, *E and B* an utpluta motita jump emphasizing the torso bends towards sides, *D and C* doing ekapada bhramari with a self rotation along with anga brahmari of the torso. Dancers with different types of bhramaris move out as ripples ebbing into small waves that gently reach the shores of the lake.

As noted in the translation of the verse, five main apsaras of electrifying beauty were sent by devas to disturb the penance of the sage and it is the attractive sound of their playing of the instruments mixed with the jingling sound of their ornaments that is said to be heard by Rama, Sita and Lakshmana<sup>4</sup>. Sabari Moksham is frequent to many such unworldly encounters. Magic realism is endowed with the grandeur of adbhuta in scenes that, wherewith, music emanates from the depths of a lake, encounter an enormously humungous beast of a bird in Jatayu, an unwavering beseeching nishachari, the magical run of an golden deer, the awe of Ravana's court, kidnapping of Sita on the unearthly swift pushpaka vimaanam. Sabari Moksham translates between the unearthly and the earthly as it also leads the audience towards reflecting upon the human poignancies like the anger of Sita when she reprimands Lakshmana, pain of Lakshmana when he is unable to hear the doubting words of Sita, the sorrow of Rama on the loss of dear Sita or the anguish over friend Jatayu's death.

The sarovara scene sets the pace for the rest of the drama. For a group of five dancers, the madhyama laya gati coupled with racy sprints of bhramaris, uthplavanas and veginis's along all possible directions across the stage appears to exert a dancer's compelling and competing urge to outlive the life span of an ebb nearing its end. The dancers rather disturb the unseen sage's penance through their dancing more than anything. The entire plot of Sabari Moksham is racy and swift with many more characters making their appearances and dancing their parts. This way, the first scene with the description of Panchapsara sarovara can be said to



be offering a fantastic prologue to the unfolding drama. Fantastic, in their dance that entices every one by their sheer vibrancy, dynamism, brimming confidence and control over aspect of rhythm with a brilliant technical finesse.

Panchapsara scene is followed by the entry of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana who enjoy the music emanating from the lake and the beauty of the forest environs. They then dance an introductory number followed by the Jatayu patrapravesanam.

### **3.1.2. Jatayu Patrapravesam**

#### **Scene 2**

A huge eagle is seen by them. Suspecting the bird to be a rakshasa in disguise, Rama challenges it. The eagle introduces himself as Jatayu, son of Syeni and Aruna, and a friend of Rama's father Dasaratha<sup>5</sup>.

The scene opens to the reciting of *kavivakyam* followed by the singing of a verse describing Jatayu.

#### ***Kavivakyam***

*Ragam: Amruthavarshini*

“Athah panchavateem gacchan antaraa raghunandanah  
Aasasaad mahaakaayam gridhram bheema paraakramam”

Trnsl: On their way to Panchavati, Sri Rama came across a huge and powerful eagle.

*Ragam: Amruthavarshini*

*Talam: Khanda Chapu*

“Tham neelajeemootha nikaashakalpam  
Supaanduroraskamudhaara veeryam  
Dadarsha tham patraratham prithivyaam  
Jataayusham shaantham ivaagnidhaavam”

Trnsl: They saw Jatayu, who looked like rain-bearing dark clouds and with a white chest. He was very powerful but calm like a forest fire quenched<sup>6</sup>.

***Descriptive analysis of technique:***

Table-II

Song	Kanakku/ Rhythm	Adavus, Important feet movements, Sira, Hasta, Greeva, Drishti Bheda and arm movements.
Kavivakyam:  Athah panchavatee gacchan antharaa raghunandanah aasasaad mahaakaayam gridhram bheema paraakramam		Jatayu is in garuda mandala with hands in garuda hasta held near the chest. As the verse proceeds, the shiras moves randomly with sudden jerks that are followed by movements of greeva and drishti
Verse: 1.Tham neelajeemootha Nikaashakalpam	Thakathakita-2	From the same posture, pralokitha-avalokitha-pralokitha drishti following prakampitha of greeva
	Thakathakita-2	arms are moved sideways-up and down with arala hands; chest is held erect
Supaanduroraskamudh aara Veeryam	Thakathakita-2	Garuda mandala; arms outstretched; torso inclined towards the front leg;
	Thakathakita-2	With prakampitha greeva head outlines the wings (preening action)

2.Tham neelajeemootha nikaashakalpam (Right and left)	Thakathakita	kripaalaga-kunchita bhramari backwards; both arms drawing full circle
	Thakathakita	Ayata; arms swung sideways- up and down
	Thakathakita-4	Tattimettu forward with garuda hasta at chest; second half of second tateitaam adavu (motita; garuda with arms converging and expanding) ending with prakampitha greeva.
3.Tham neelajeemootha nikaashakalpam	Thakadhimi thakadhimi-5	Samachalana ; kripalaga uthplavana with knees facing forward ending in muzhumandi/ motitha mandala; arms extended flinging sideways up and down
4.Tham neelajeemootha nikaashakalpam	Right and Left Thakathakita- 4	Motitha uthplavana;drishti, greeva following the jerky shira (looking around)
5.Tham neelajeemootha nikaashakalpam	Thakadhimi thakadhimi-5	Samachalana ; kripalaga uthplavana with knees facing forward ending in muzhumandi/ motitha mandala; arms extended flinging sideways up and down
Dadarsha tam patraratham Prithivyaam	Thakadhimithaka -2	Thattimettu; karthari uthplavana; natyarambham

	Thakadhimi- 3	Thattimettu; kripalaga uthplavana; full garuda mandala (on floor)
Jataayusham shaantam Ivaagnidhaavam		Garuda mandala (same position as above),garuda hasta taken around; alolita shiras
6.Tham neelajeemootha nikaashakalpam	Thakadhimi;____ thakadhimi thaka	Usi; Natyarambham
	Thakathakita-3; thakita-3	Thattimettu along an angle
	Thakita-3; ta	Diditei (preritha; svasthikam; alternate legs flung sideways)
	Thakadhimi tei tei ____ Diditei	Sama kuttana in usi
7.Tham neelajeemootha nikaashakalpam	Thakathakita-4	Ayathakuttana;natyaaramb ham with bent torso
Thaana dhirana dheem Thaam tharitha dhiritha thaam Dhariku jekuna dhiriku Dhari kukundhanamthari	Thakathakita-4	Third thatheithaha with arala hasta
Thaahathajamthari Thaanadhiranadheem	Thakadhimi-2	First theihatheihi (kudichumettadavu)
Tharithadhirithathaam	_____ Thakitathakitath aka	Saranachaari; natyarambham

<u>Tharikitathom ta</u> <u>Tharikitathom ta</u> <u>Tharikitathom</u>	Thakitathakitath aka	Arms swung on sides; diditei-3
Tham neelajeemootha.....	Thakadhimi thakadhimi-5	Samachalam; kripalaga uthplavanam; vegini towards end position.

As a slightly diffused light starts to fall in from the side wings, we see the dancer at the centre of the stage. The character of Jatayu can be identified instantly from the stance of the dancer who is positioned in garuda mandala with hands in garuda hasta near chest and greeva and drishti following the jerky movements of the shira.

Patrapravesham, in general usage, tries to show the distinctness typical of a particular character at the first instance of its entry itself. This is usually made evident through a special costume, make-up or sound effects like the noise the character makes or some special posture or action. The introduction of the character then proceeds by description of the character's physical attributes and accomplishments which are sung to a lyrical text and accompanied by mimetic or gestural actions. These establish the importance of the portrayal. Subsequently, the character's interaction with others in-line with the narrative frame of the play or drama helps the audience determine and position the role that is played. Here, in the case of Jatayu, the positioning of the anga, pratyanga and upanga together with the costume help us recognize general nature of the character when the dancer first appears on the stage itself. Jatayu's costume is burnt sienna coloured attire suggestive of eagle's natural colour. The material of natural fabric is rough textured with uneven edges extending towards the arms and underneath it with pleats and frills suggestive of its wings. Apart from this, there is no elaborate head gear or

wings. A hood up till garuda's temple acts as a head gear and with it, an extension covers the nose with an appendage indicative of the characteristic hooked beak of the bird. The costume design of any dancer should enhance the execution of the dance without creating any hurdle that cuts short the optimum performance ability of the artist. In this case, the use of light weight ornaments made of knitted jute and the knee length kaccha (pyjama) provides ample scope for the artist to execute his movements with ease. The costume that conveniently fits in also marks the outline or silhouette of the four main parts of the bird's body vis-à-vis the head, wings, torso and the legs. This kind of fit attire heightens the effect of the adavus typical of Jatayu.

Jatayu majorly uses garuda mandala, garuda hasta and arala hasta (used to show wings). Some of the other positions and movements often used here are motita mandala, ayata, sama, prerita, karthari uthplavana, kripalaga-uthplavana, kuttana and kripalaga-kunchitabhramari. Several of the adavus or intermediary positions that pass through different levels, pictures the character as being constantly on the move and illustrates the avian mobile nature of the bird. This is well demonstrated in, for example, the third repetition of the line 'Tham neela jeemootha....' In this phrase, Jatayu starts with sama-chalanam , then executes a kripalaga uthplavana jumping to a level above his height and then lands on a front bent knee motitam at the floor level. He again rises to samam to repeat the same phrase accompanied by a synchronous flapping of the wings.



**Fig: 10**

**Jatayu**

The movements of Jatayu are choreographed such that the adavus give scope for expansive placement of the arms and legs to convey the gigantic hugeness of its body and elongated wingspan of the bird which has an outstretched reach. The photo illustrates one such position.



**Fig:11**

**Jatayu**

## Floor patterns:

Tam neela-4th repetition

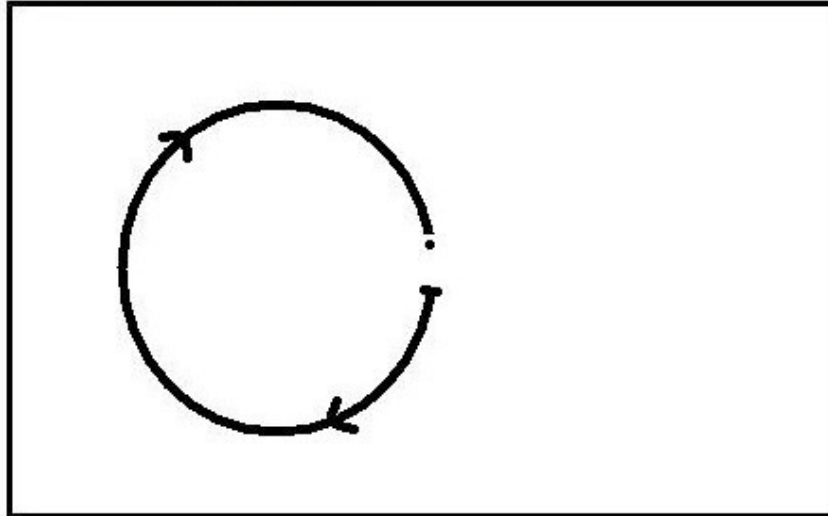


Image-28

Tam neela-6th repetition

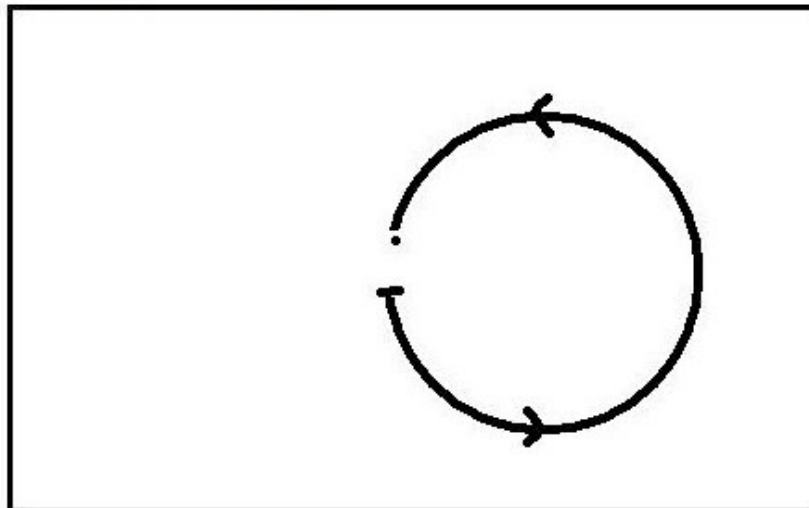


Image-29



Tam neela- 7th repetition

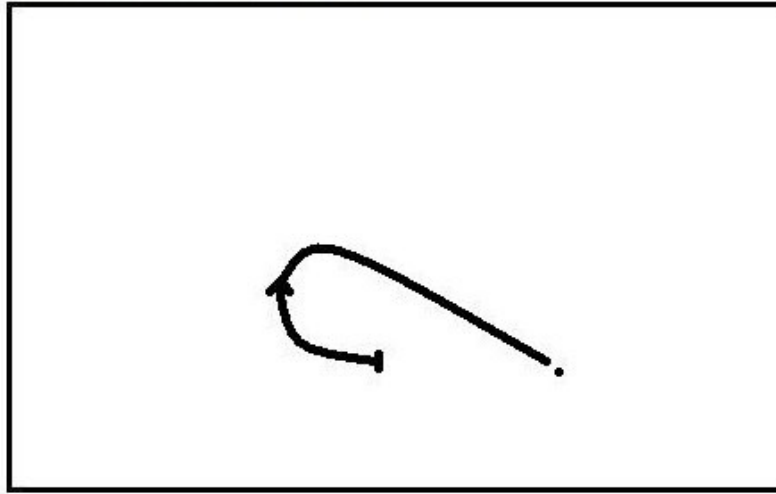


Image-30

Tam neela after theermanam

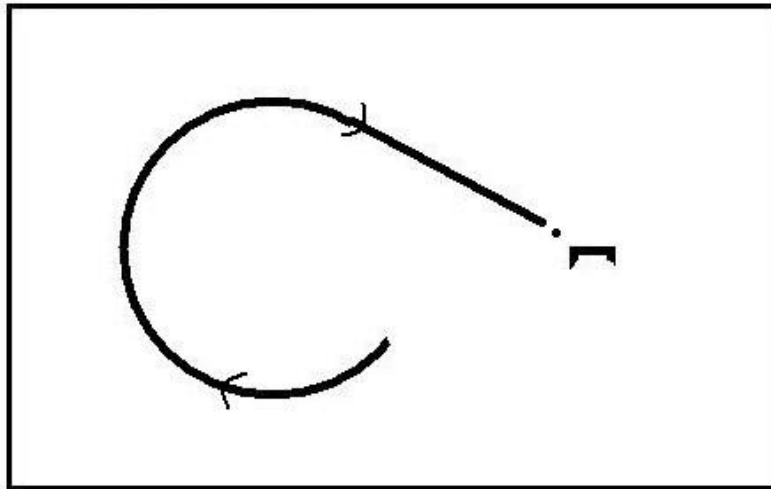


Image-31

The bird's movements are choreographed in such a way as to emphasise the turn and flex of the body when stationary and flapping of wings when in flight (second repetition of 'Tham neela' and fourth repetition of 'Tham neela'). The power and strength of sustained motion executed by incessant

flapping of its wings in tautly held natyarambham with an erect torso convey a sense of marked majesty in portraying the mythical bird. Preening of its feathers is a typical action of birds. This action is rendered using dhuta shira with prakampita greeva and avalokita drishti.

The other features of this scene are the sections depicting the circular flight trajectory of the eagle across the sky (stage). It is the character distinct of any bird of prey to encircle the sky. For example, the entire phase of third to fifth 'Tham neela' tries to show how the eagle propels itself forward by a constant flinging and flapping of its wings at fluctuating levels of flight. It stops at the centre stage to look out for its prey (with a jerky shira, greeva and drishti) and then continues its flight before landing on the ground in a full garuda mandala ('prativyaam'). It again takes to flight in the same circular trajectory (seventh 'Tham neela') but in an usi with arms in natyarambham showing the fine glide of the eagle. The floor pattern of movement across the stage shows the circular path of flight trajectory of the eagle.

Considering the fact that the depiction of actions and movement of eagle on a stage requires a fair amount of variety, the element of natyadharmi, and the importance given to stylization becomes conspicuous in the depiction of a natural movement pattern of a bird

### **3.1.3 Surpanakha Patrapravesanam**

After meeting Jatayu, Rama, Sita and Lakshmana proceed on their journey towards Panchavati. The next scene shows the entry of Surpanakha, sister of Ravana. Surpanakha's patrapravesanam includes a description of Surpanakha set to Dhatuvardhani ragam in Misrachapu

with interspersing theermanams. Rukmini Devi is known to have compiled and composed the theermanams.

Surpanakha enters to a jati in fast tempo in Adi talam that goes like this:

Takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita  
takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita ||  
takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita  
takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita ||  
tonkita kitakita tonkita takatari kitataka takun tari kinajaga  
kinataka takkudikku thak kitatat tonga kitakita tadinginatom ||  
takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita  
tonkita kitakita tonkita takatari kitataka takun tari kinajaga ||  
kinataka takkudikku tak kitatat tonga kitakita tadinginatom  
takku dikku tat tadinginatom,  
tat tadinginatom,  
tadinginatom ||

A verse follows:

Saa thu shoorpanakha naama dashagreevasya rakshasaha: |  
Bhagini rakshasi kachit aajagaama yadrchaya ||  
Vikr̥thaa cha viroopaa cha karaalaa nirṇathodhari |  
Viroopakshi sudryrittaa daarunāa bhairavasvanaa ||

Trsnl:

At the time a rakshasi by name surpanakha, sister of Ravana, came there by chance. (Surpanakha was) ugly fierce, with bulging belly, of mean character and hoarse voice<sup>7</sup>.

Following this is a theermanam in Misrachapu:

Dalangutom takatadinginatom ||  
Tarita danata jam; ; , taka ||  
naka jam ; ; di taka naka jam, ||  
tarita danata jam , jam , tarita , ||  
tari taka naka dith, takun tari taka ||  
tarita danata jonuta dimita tarikita ||  
tom ; , tarikitatom ; , tarikitatom , ||

The scene description in the programme synopsis is given below:

Scene 3: The ferocious rakshasi, Surpanakha, who could take any shape at will, is roaming about in the forest near Panchavati. She sees Rama and is captivated by his beauty. She approaches Rama and proudly introduces herself as a rakshasi, sister of Ravana, King of Lanka...<sup>8</sup>

### **Descriptive analysis of technique:**

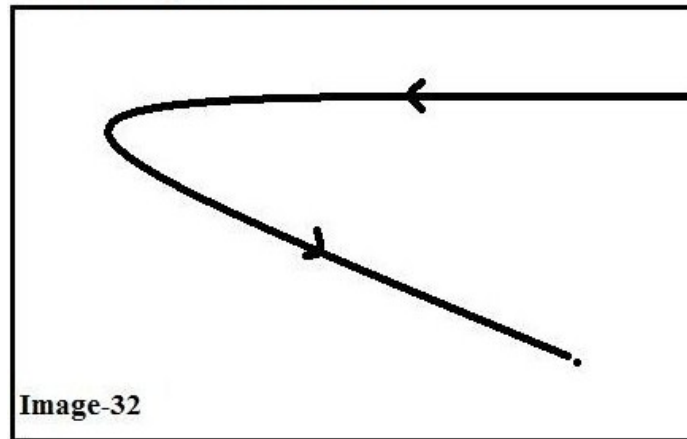
Table-III

Sl. No	Swara/Jathi/Verse	Kanakku/Rhythm	Adavus, Important feet movements, Sira, Hasta, Greeva, Drishti Bheda and arm movements.
1	Takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita    2 times	Takadimi (16)	1 <sup>st</sup> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> avartanam- slow chalanam; 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 4 <sup>th</sup> avartanam fast chalanam; mushti hasta in natyarambam
2	tonkita kitakita tonkita takatari kitataka takun tari kinajaga kinataka takkudikku thak kitatat tonga kitakita tadinginatom	Takadimi-8	Vegini and rest; Dola hasta with raised arms above head level; alokita drishti, shiras moves from one side to another emphasizing intermittent stops. Both shiras and drishti follow same direction
3	takkudu dikkudu dirrak kitta takkun taari tonkita nankita	Takadimi-4	Same as in Set-I

	tonkita kitakita tonkita takatari kitataka takun tari kinajaga    kinataka takkudikku tak kitatat tonga	Takadimi-7	Vegini and rest
4	kitakita tadinginatom, takku dikku tat tadinginatom, tat tadinginatom, tadinginatom	Takadimi taka takadimi takita takatakita takitata	Angabhramari; ayata kuttana; tei, tei, <u>diditei</u> (ta) tei, <u>diditei</u> (ta) teididitei (ta)
5	Saa thu shoorpanakha naama dashagreevasya rakshasaha:	Takitatakadimi -8	Shakata hasta in natyarambam positin - Bhamari backwards; teiyya teihi; bhramari backwards; tei tei <u>teiteididitei</u> (diagonally to two sides)
6	Bhagini rakshasi kachit aajagaama yadrachaya	Takatakadimi takatakadimi taka takita takadimi takitatakadimi	Palli hasta- ayatakuttana- utpluta sideways; mushti hasta in natyaramba position- samakuttana
7	Dalangutom takatadinginatom    Tarita danata jam; ; , taka    naka jam ; ; di taka naka jam, 	Takitatakadimi Takadimi takitatakadimi teididitei	Diditeididitei; sarukkal adavu;
	tarita danata jam , jam, tarita ,    tari taka naka dith, takun tari	Takitatakadimi takitatakadimi	Tangidutatadinna adavu(tatti-natti sideways

	taka		and front)
8	Tarita danata jonuta dimita <u>tarikita  tom; , tarikitatom; ,</u> <u>tarikitatom; ,</u>	Takita-5	Chalana( 4 steps backwards)- mushti in natyarambam position; diditei (taka) diditei (taka) diditei (taka)
9	Vikr̥ṭhaa cha viroopaa cha karaala nirṇathodhari	Takitatakadimi takitatakadimi Takadimi(usi)- 3	Ardhachandra hasta on right hand near face; ayata kuttana
	Vikr̥ṭhaa cha viroopaa cha karaala nirṇathodhari		Teiyyateihi- turn back and front
10	Viroopaakshi sudryṛṭṭaa daaruṇaa bhairavasvanaa		Tattimettu sideways- right ardhachandra hasta near face; usi sideways.

Saathu soorpanakha naama...



The scene opens to the singing of the sollukattu “takkudu dikkudu...”. Surpanakha enters from offstage behind the 3<sup>rd</sup> wing. She moves towards upstage right end covering the entire stage in large gaits (Image-32). As she does this, a blue light fades-in unevenly on the cyclorama. The cyclorama, along its entire and breadth, consists of a painting which is

composed of hazy outlines of tree trunks, branches, vines, shrubs and their foliage. It is not densely picturised as the lighting fills the gaps with patches of darkness and ensures the creation of a perspective of thick and dense forest cover where the events happen. The rest is left to the imagination of the viewer. The prominence of blue, both on the background and on the stage floor, indicates that dusk has fallen. And with parts of stage or forest cover enveloped in darkness here and light there, it can be understood that moon is up above the horizon. The stage thus sets the ambience for the activities of a *nishaachari*<sup>9</sup>.

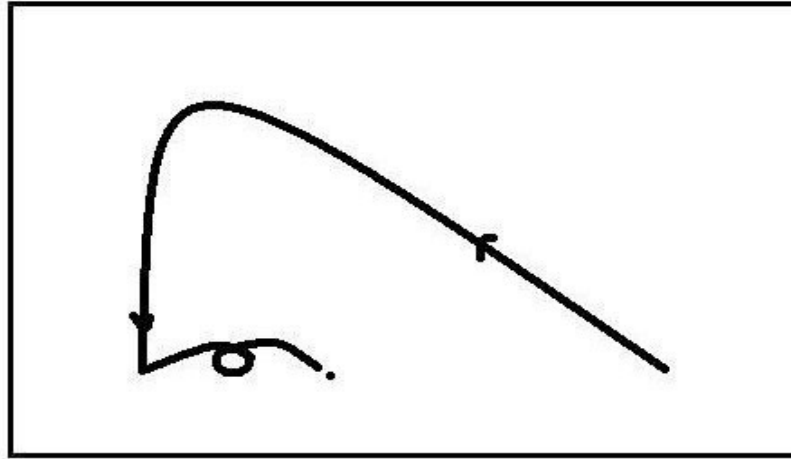
Surpanakha moves horizontally across in the first four avartanam of the jathi when a diffused red light from behind both the 3<sup>rd</sup> right and left wings is projected on her upper body. The red, though diffuse, falls sharply against silhouetting her profile, to reflect upon the nature of the character. It highlights at her entry itself, the fierceness of her facial features, the strong and sharp thumping moves made by her bulky self and the swift striking glances of her wandering look. The colour red, as used in *katti vesham* of Kathakali, is used here too that is symbolic of her *tamasic* nature. Surpanakha is dressed in red and black: black back bit and black *pallu* covering her torso and pleated to fall below her belly; red blouse and skirt with red floral designs on black. The *oddiyaanam* usually worn over the pallu and skirt is worn underneath the pleats of the pallu. This in no way emphasizes or marks the curve of the waist as is in the case of a character like Sita who is shown having a dainty waistline. It only serves the purpose of holding the dancer's costume and body in proper alignment. The wide pleats of the ends of the pallu which fall over her belly suggest the contours of her bulging waist line. A *kaccha* (pyjama) is worn underneath the skirt that extends till the ankles. The use of *kacha*, as in *Jatayu*, helps in free and unhindered movement of the legs. The material used for costume is majorly starched cotton which unlike silk increases the girth and body volume of the character.

The ornaments like *kaapu*, *thandai*<sup>10</sup>, *haaram*, ear rings, hair ornaments and armlet are not of delicate or intricate design nor are they set with stones as in the case of Sita or other aristocratic characters. The traditional *adukkumala* that covers the area from throat to chest, used by traditional kathakali artists is also worn by her. This perhaps adds to the dramatic element of such characters. On the whole, the workmanship of the jewels used for Surpanakha is made to reflect the primitiveness of the society she lives in.

Now, let us have a look at the first jati. The intonation is provided with emphasis on the first syllable of every alternative word – **thak**kudu dikkudu **dirra** kitta **thak**kun tari **tong**ita nangita

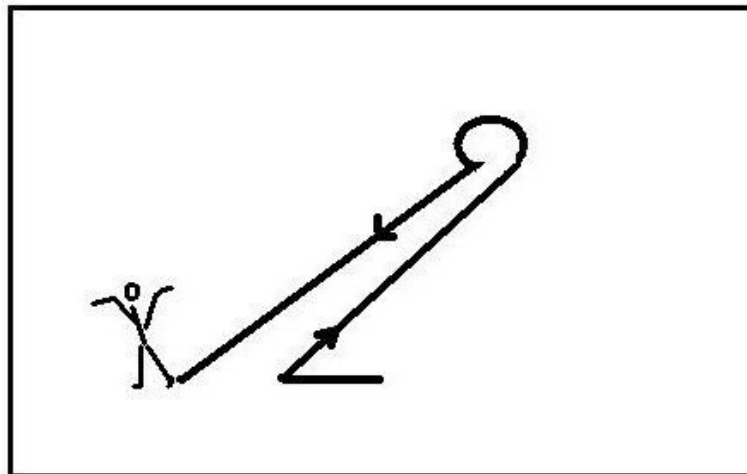
The repetition of same character in every sollu/ word places stress on the *kulukki nadai* in chaturashra that is typical of the Kalakshetra school. But here, the stress matters more as it reveals the pounding giant strides of Surpanakha. The torso and arms simultaneously turning right then left emphasizes the nadai. The next line in the jati “tonkita kitakita tonkita takatari kitataka...” is like a torrent of ‘takatakatakataka....’which creates a vivid image of quick flurry of steps. This contrasts the medium paced thumping mode made at the entry. After a scurried pace diagonally across the stage, Surpanakha stops at Upper Left stage to position herself with uplifted dola hands. The impression created here is that of the character, a *nishachari*, running amok on the forest floor then perches on a rock or tree of considerable height to get a better vantage point to look around her. Her alokita drishti with wide open eyes moving along with frequent jerky moves of the shiras mimics the moves and looks of nocturnal birds like owl or a day scavenger like eagle or vulture which swoops down and glides up before perching itself on a tree with momentarily upraised wings similar to Surpanakha’s arms. These moves are interesting and bring a characteristic (identical) feel of a wandering nishachari.



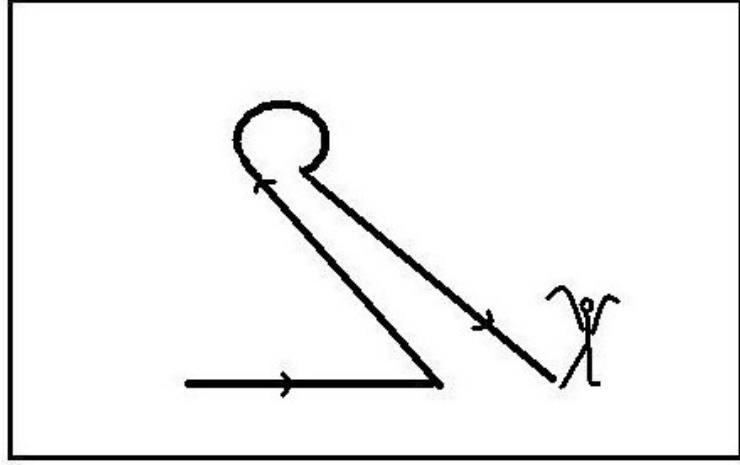


**Image-33**

This is again followed by a chalana followed by a vegini- a swoop and perch again back and forth to the Upper Left stage. From there, she takes a wide bhamari with widely placed legs and runs to come to the DownCentre stage before executing a theermanam. The angabhramari that is a swirl down from the vantage point where she is perched is unlike the well measured and slickly executed ekapada bhamari of the panchapsaras or the kripalaga- kunchita bhamari of Jatayu. Though it is done with control and finesse, it lacks the smoothness which is evident in the other two cases. This is done towards making a rough transit (Image-33).



**Image-34**



**Image-35**



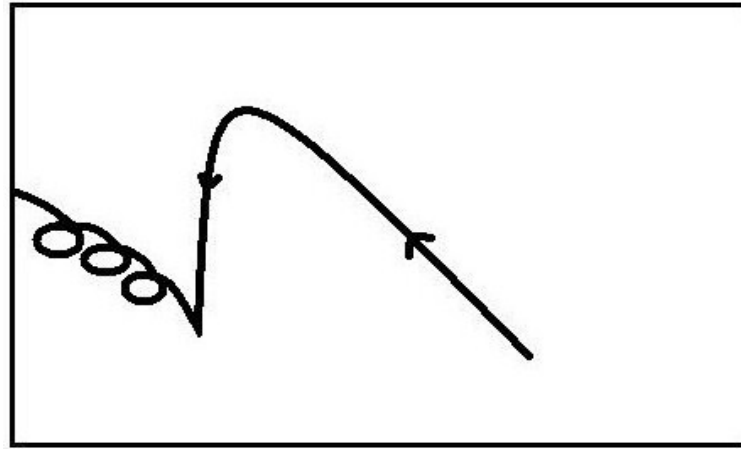
**Fig:12**

### **Surpanakha**

A verse follows this theermanam introducing Supanakha. The adavus described in the set 5 and set 6 (table-III) show the usage of hastas like shakatam and mushti. Shakatam is used to depict the rakshasa nature of Surpanakha and mushti, her mighty power. To the second line ending in “...aajagaama yaaadrcchaya”, she is shown with mushti hasta in natyaramba giving the picture of a rakshasi approaching and ready for a fight. The whole sequence shows her basically moving about in the forest

looking for a hunt and prepared to pounce on her prey any moment (Image-34,35).

Another theermanam follows this verse. This typically shows her preparedness or readiness before heading for a fight. The adavus do not have rounded or curved placement of arms but a straight push or throw emphasizing the power and vigour without grace. Some of the important moves are- both palms held tight on one another; sarukkal adavu with thrust on the push of ardhachandra hands to the sides and the sharp gliding feet; throw of alapadma to sides and forward; walk with extended mushti hands and pounding chalana.



**Image-36**

The next line of the verse is the last line of her introduction scene. From the defensive attacking mood she exhibits in the theermanam, she again resorts to running and prowling and perching aloft looking for a prey. In the process, she takes a back and forth diagonally across the stage. Finally, there is a repeat of the first sequence of entry with the jathi 'takkudu dikkudu...'. Her exit is interesting as she takes four bhramaris to disappear through the stage right to off stage. It is again four anga bhramaris done continuously to create a picture of whirling down from a height and swooshing past in a jiffy (Image-36).

### 3.2.Dancing in the Tableau

In this section, we deal with perspectives on the Why, How and What interpretations and a focus on the dancer in Rukmini Devi's drama mode of choreography. I have tried to look at issues on why dance dramas? How it was worked out? : with collective dancing over solo and what it had meant to do?: on being tableaux of ancient Indian mythical stories

Before Rukmini Devi began learning Sadir from Gowri ammal, she had experimented with a few themes that had close allegiance to the theosophical society's ideology. Among these, two are notable for their style of presentation. Edwin Arnold's English play 'The Light of Asia' was as Sarada (1985, 2) says shown, 'visually on the stage by actors enacting it through speech movements and tableau formations'. In this Rukmini Devi had played the parts of swan, inspired from Pavlova's famous episode of the dying swan<sup>11</sup>, and the role of Yasodhara. Bhishma- (Incidents in the life of Bhishma) was another play presented in 1937 where Rukmini Devi enacted the role of Ganga and Matsyagandhi 'swaying rhythmically in an abstract creative form of dance covering the whole stage.'(Sarada 1984,3). It is also mentioned that the method of staging Bhishma was similar to that which Greek and medieval dramatists used. The play, instead of being spilt into scenes where characters had to move back and forth to the same setting that has to be repeated, the stage itself was divided into two or three parts where the characters could move to different parts of the stage to show the shift in scene.<sup>12</sup> Both these productions had theatrical actions, stage settings, dialogues, dance, tableau formations, chorus and instrumental music.

What we learn from these is that Rukmini Devi had a sense of usage of stage in various compositions when she had presented these plays as entertainment and before she had started learning dance. When she began

using these inputs in presentation of Bharatanatyam as dance-drama, supported with specially composed music for dance and elements from dance-drama traditions of Kuravanji, Bhagavad mela and technique of Kathakali, the result was a culmination and combination of all these with her own style in choreography. Her 'mission' of 'spirituality' through dance earlier infused into and propagated through her solo performances was continued in her dance-dramas too as she found dance-drama as one of the ways 'to educate people to understand divinity and express reverence' (Hoffman 2001,89).

Within a couple of years after she started performing solo, she began to include her students in the performances. Her ventures in dance-drama choreographies also emphasized this aspect where she gave many of her students a chance to dance in groups or enact various roles of the plot. Why was there a stress on dance dramas and not solo dancing at Kalakshetra? It is not an unknown fact that Kalakshetra has produced more teachers than performing artists. Even among performers, very few have attempted to explore the creative art in ways different from what their almahater taught them- not any different from the set 'classical' repertoire or dance drama genre. The answer has much to do with a response conditioned to a pedagogical practice that allayed fears of faltering on lines of 'purity' or 'authenticity' or 'propriety'- the new usherers of 'spirituality'. On the issue of solo dancing not being encouraged at Kalakshetra, Ramnarayan (1984) says 'except Rukmini Devi and Sarada Hoffman, not a single dancer has had a chance to give a solo recital at Kalakshetra'. She voices her strong disagreement to Rukmini Devi's view that holds that 'people will tire of seeing the same face in dance dramas and solo performances'. Referring once to dancers like Anna Pavlova, Rukmini Devi wrote:

"The rigorous work, the complete subjugation of all personal desires and pleasures, the abandonment of one's being to the Cause, are very similar to what we find in the great learned artists, musicians and pundits of India. They lived only for their Art; everything else took second place. In all countries this attitude belongs to the few; and to the majority it is

either a matter of great learning and study or an expression of their simple joys of life through folk-dancing as one finds particularly amongst the peasant people both in the West and in India. This can also be a great contribution to the Nation; for though the collective atmosphere created adds to the grace of a country and the helping of individuals to express the hidden God. Not everyone is blessed by the gods in having all the gifts that a dancer must possess; and therefore collective dancing, which can be simple, beautiful, classical and inspiring, is bound to bring new life and an expression of joy particularly in these days of gloom”<sup>13</sup>

It was a period of gloom as the world war-II had begun in Europe in 1939 and by 1940, the war was in full swing with Japanese bombing Pearl harbour and US entering the war. India too had experienced one of the worst catastrophies in the form of Bengal famine in the year 1943. What was her reaction to this period of gloom? Her dance was neither pro-active nor responsive about war nor any other calamity. She had outrightly rejected the war as an ugly manifestation of the ways of western mind and also rejected the influence of war on the minds of the western artists who inturn were said to be responsible for inspiring war. She had spoken for the glorious art of Persia, India and Greece against the works produced by Epstein and the like effected by the war and she shut off the world against the ‘spirituality’ she propounded. She found it the best solution as it offered according to her, ‘new life’ and ‘expression of joy’ and she went about performing. In 1939, she had conducted her first extended tour of South India and in the years between 1940 and 1944, she was busy giving solo recitals. In 1944, she composed her first dance-drama Kutrala kuravanji and presented it at many shows.

From what Rukmini Devi states above, it was one thing to be among the few who lived for arts sake and thus be great. It was another thing to be part of a majority to learn and practice art to express joy through classical, collective dancing towards contributing to embellishing the nation and to escape the feelings of gloom. As for the latter majority, who were still trying to express a hidden god, the former few had become great as to

them god had revealed as art. By comprehending such a division in the art world, Rukmini Devi acknowledged a steady chasm between the two.

How did collective dancing fare better according to her? Group dancing was also not an entirely new phenomenon during this time as there were foreign troupes of Denishawn company and Pavlova's troupe who had come to India in the 1920's, followed by Uday Shankar and later, Ram gopal who had performed dance-dramas which had collective dancing. According to what Rukmini Devi says, group dancing did not need a dancer to be exceptionally good in all aspects of performance or 'gifts that a dancer must possess'. In other words it is the quantity- the number of dancers that mattered more than quality. What are the probable god given gifts that Rukmini Devi refers to? It might be said to be mainly dependent on- physique, beauty, performance ability of Nritha, abhinaya. Even if a dancer is not up to the mark on one or some of the necessary attributes, she or he can make up for it in a group performance as the focus does not stay for long on a single dancer in the case of a dance-drama. This is what she had meant.

There is also more to what she said. To dance in a dance-drama in a particular role also meant that it now depended more on the factors which you had no control of especially your physique and appearance. For example, your short stature would promise you a role in *sagara varnana* in the drama *Choodamani pradanam* as the dancers in *sagara varnana* showed the many animals hidden inside the ocean, big and small though, but that which gives Hanuman, who is portrayed by a senior dancer of short stature, the necessary height of vantage as he looks at them and flies past them on his mission across the Indian ocean. At the same time if you are tall and well built it might land you as a rakshasi tormenting Sita in *Asoka vana* in the same drama. Whether it was followed as a rule or not, the similarity in execution of nritha and abhinaya was hence a deciding factor to perform in a drama. The training at Kalakshetra was

meant to do exactly that. So far as it gave an opportunity to perform at student level, it provided necessary stage experience to an amateur performer and provided scope for further learning from seniors who portrayed more important roles. But when the basics of training pedagogy is meant to do only this, then it becomes a problematic where one has to have a relook at the teaching methodology with probing questions. 'Not every one is blessed by the gods in having all the gifts that a dancer must possess... and therefore collective dancing..' let us look at an incident recounted from Balasaraswati's life on how she was tested if she could proceed with learning to dance (Pattabhiraman 1984,25). When Jayammal asked her mother Veena Dhanammal if Balasaraswati, her daughter could be taught dancing, Dhanammal, whose eyesight had weakened by then had said no in a thrice. Later, 'she asked my mother one day whether her daughter that's me, was squint-eyed. My mother answered in the negative. Next she asked if I had good, orderly rows of teeth. Yes, said my mother. Next question: is she good looking? My mother said that I was not a beauty but good looking all right. Finally she asked if I sang well. I had to sing to prove it. The test was over. Grandma finally gave permission for me to study dancing'. A student was judged on her appearance before she started learning dancing to see if she had any major physical aberrations to create in the onlooker any unhealthy feeling that would prevent viewing the dance. Similarly, in the case of devadasi murai too looks had a role in deciding whether she could become a dancer. Kersenboom (b.4) mentions that, the aspirant had to undergo all the training necessary before her initiation ceremony or the Gajjai pooja. However, for the marriage and dedication rites to be conducted, permission had to be granted by ten priests and ten devadasis officiating in the temple for which the important criteria included the virginity of the girl, her looks and her training. Only after permission was granted would the rites follow and she would be given permission to dance in front of the deity. In both cases, Bala's and devadasi's as seen above, stipulatory conditions were to be fulfilled before qualifying a person as a dancer. But as per Rukmini Devi's statement



supporting collective dancing, it is suggested that a dancer (known so after her training) can perform in collective dancing though she does not meet all the pre requisites or 'god given gifts' needed of a dancer. But being a collective dance, there were other conditions to be met with- not only looks as in the case of solo dancing or physique (height and built) as earlier noted in the case of group dancing. These included synchronous dancing both nritta and abhinaya where individual style or excellence in presentation or improvisation had to be subdued to follow the choreographer's intent as was usually the case in any group dancing. As Sadir was a solo form of dance, it did not put such a restraint on the learner and gave the dancer scope for individuality in the stage of learning itself. In this light, let us look at the problematic of the training pedagogy at Kalakshetra, as mentioned earlier, which was meant to produce synchronous effect in dancing, an important criteria supporting collective dancing in Rukmini Devi's dance-dramas.

Apart from Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Chokkalingam pillai, two devadasis had taught at Kalakshetra. One, being Karaikkal Saradambal Ammal who is said to have 'taught special traditional exercises for the students before the regular class hours' and also 'polished the adavus and fundamental steps and made these graceful'. Another dancer, being Mylapore Gowri ammal, who 'added graceful embellishments to our accurate adavus' (Sarada 1985,20 ) She also mentions that 'in the early days, Rukmini Devi used to take a private class early in the morning, before the regular class hours for the practice of ballet exercises. These she thought would help to make the dance postures accurate, and the adavus accurate in form. She was particular that there should be no unnecessary movements of the foot or any limb of the body'. In these lines quoted above, Sarada points to 'polishing of adavus', 'accuracy of adavus' or 'accuracy of postures'. Sarada had knowledge of music, dance and had learnt sastras from her grand father Pandit Subrahmanya Sastri. But she had not been trained in dance<sup>14</sup>. Therefore, the terms she uses in reference

to depiction of fundamental training in Bharatanatyam should be looked at critically. She was an insider in the activities of training in dance that ensued at Kalakshetra and had most probably learnt dance from seeing or through her experience of noting down every move in the items performed by Rukmini Devi and from creating a standardised theoretical based practical from the textual tradition. So, the description was not from an experiential perspective of a practicing dancer but as an opinion of a notator or a member of participant/serious audience. Whether the traditional teachers followed being 'accurate' as an end in itself is questionable because it is Sarada who uses it in the context of both their teaching and Rukmini Devi's teaching. Though usage of such terminology may be considered subjective to an extent, it can be said to be largely reflected from a dominant view of the management and establishment of Kalakshetra as she had succeeded Meenakshisundaram Pillai as the Head of the dance department in the year 1940 itself. She adds, 'The adavus which are made up of different beautiful postures of the limbs should be practised one after the other with picturesque clarity and smoothness. This resulted in the Kalakshetra style of dance concurring with the descriptions contained in the ancient treatise of Dance. A new Kalakshetra style developed.' To be 'accurate' in execution of adavu or posture meant following a strictly standardized delineation of a pattern of an adavu or posture. So this clarity or accuracy in adavus is what defined the Kalakshetra style. And this accurateness was to be maintained as an end in itself in collective dancing where all kinds of dancers could be accommodated provided they fulfilled the conditions of producing synchronous effect mandatory in a Kalakshetra dance-drama. Kalakshetra 'moulds' were thus prepared to create other moulds with the main purpose of propagating and sustaining the legacy of Kalakshetra style.

In the pre-independent and newly independent India, the kind of emphasis on religion changed. The religious thought expressed by

devadasis was Madura Bhakti- mainly Bhakti through srngara or vatsalya. The religious-culture based performances prevalent during the period of independence struggle in Southern India consisted mainly of forms like Harikatha kalakshepa in music, Bhajan's popularized by Gandhiji apart from the cutcheri format of classical vocal music. Bhakti marga or devotion to a personalized god and especially Madura bhakti as a means of attaining god, propounded since the 6<sup>th</sup> century, was a method followed to popularize bhakti and make it easily relatable among the greater public to counter the effect of ascetic religions like Jainism and Buddhism that had spread in India. Religion during the colonial rule mainly among the general public influenced by the independence struggle, did not require the same method of propagation as the purpose was to realize and enumerate upon the greatness of our gods and goddesses and mobilize support in establishing of a national identity where everyone was able to relate to popular myths. In the course of this, the division between the private and public domain became starkly consistent enough for the latter to overpower the former to meet political ends. The padams and Javali's that had its hey days in the recent 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century which emulated the agam poetry of the sangam era slowly lost its domain in the public where victorial prudency was upheld in judging indigenious arts. It soon lost its ground to the vaggeyakaras of Tyagaraja genre. And as one of the effects of this, the concept madura bhakti that emphasized upon conveying the erotic yearning of a bhakta, lost its context during the colonial - pre-independence period and in its place came up forms which enumerated upon narration of popular mythological stories of Ramayana or Mahabharata or songs that described of the various attributes and greatness of Gods and relied on *namasankeertanas*. Rukmini Devi's dance-dramas based on such popular epics and stories thus found a greater relevance during this period. Rukmini Devi speaking on her dance-dramas opines that she felt it 'would be a novel way of bringing religion to people' (1985b,) and 'it was one of the ways to educate people to understand divinity and express reverence' (Hoffman 2005,). Her intention in

presenting these plays was to 'give to all who witness them and hear the music of the slokas, a sense of the beauty that purifies and uplifts'.<sup>15</sup> In them, she emphasized the spiritual significance of her work and referred to this concept in various ways- to 'have an elevating influence on all who witness it'<sup>16</sup> and 'evoke devotion in the hearts of the people'<sup>17</sup>

Apart from composing dance-dramas based on Kuravanjis, Bhagavatamela natakas and others like Andal charitram, Gitagovindam, Kumara Sambhavam, Shyama, Matsya-Kurma avataras and others, her series on Ramayana was well known. Ramayana series consisting of six productions included: Sita swayamvaram (1954), Rama vanagamanam (1960), Paduka pattabhishekam (1960) Sabari Moksham (1965), Choodamani Pradanam (1968) and Mahapattabhishekam (1970). Rukmini Devi, who always vouched for idealized portrayal of characteristics of Gods and Goddesses in solo items, found a wider canvas for her 'spiritualising' agenda through the dance-dramas, especially in the character of Sri Rama, who she considered to be the 'eternal inspirer of the Indian people.' Ramayana is considered to be the bedrock of Hindu morality and has portrayal of idealized characters and presented idealised Indian familial values. 'Valmiki characterized Rama as a man who devoted his whole life to the 'interest' and 'service' of others' and Sita as one whose wifely virtues are unparalleled and matchless seasoned with the quality of forgiveness' (Nagaih 1981,5).

Speaking about the technique in Ramayana productions, Rukmini Devi says, 'the technique in this play may appear new when we think of the usual *thillanas* and *varnas* etc. But every movement is according to the *Sastra* though not presented in a stereotype form. All to create a world of beauty!' (Rukmini Devi 1969). In the concluding portion on her note on Ramayana productions she says, 'I wish to make it clear that although these dramas are not dance dramas handed over from the past, I have in composing the dances followed the rules of Bharata. I have used only the classical styles and technique; the music is purely classical and in the

presentation itself I have tried to keep everything as representative of the age of Ramayana as possible. I have been true to tradition in my attitude to the production, in my devotion to Sri Rama and to the Ramayana, in the classicism of the styles of the dances and music used. I fully believe that I have done no violence of any kind to the classical tradition.’(Rukmini Devi 1983b).

Rukmini Devi did not want to transgress the lakshman rekha of what she considered the ‘authentic sastric tradition’. The dance-dramas she created were a culmination of her understanding of Indian cultural values, her training in Bharatanatyam and her inimitable style of creativity. Though the former two were preconditioned by her response to various contexts, her artistic creativity enhanced the appeal of her style with which she built a steady set of Dance-dramas. She created it to be showcases to represent the pinnacles of Indian cultural and religious thoughts. And it was meant to be preserved- adavu by adavu and scene by scene. It was meant to be performed and preserved as her contribution nevertheless of having been performed and repeated more than a hundred times. Every dance-drama retains her original concept and content though the context in which it was created might have changed. The continuous repetition of this concept and content over a period of almost more than half a century dangerously borders on redundancy but being based on Indian philosophical thought, its value in the Indian society is difficult to fade into oblivion as it still tries to re-instill the values it was meant to achieve in a changing context. Let us take the case of Jatayu patrapravesham for instance. The thumping or stamping of the feet are clearly heard and felt even by the person on the extreme back in the audience; the aramandi is perfect; Jatayu portrayed by dancers like Krishnamurthy was same as that done by Sreejith Krishna and now Arun. Every gesture, every move and glance is still repeated. The composer still yields the baton as it is the story line and the choreography that holds an important place in drama. Rukmini Devi created her dance-dramas to be classic examples of her

ideal vision. And it is no wonder that she herself was keen to develop a museum- a different type of museum to reflect her ideals for which a plan was drawn and two attempts were made during her lifetime to launch the museum (Nagaswamy 2005,76). She had gathered a force to materialise her mission and she credited each and every one associated with her at varying levels in their contribution in creating the dance dramas. In her notes on choreographic works and in her president's letter in each issue of Besant cultural centre quarterly, she gave proper acknowledgement for all those involved in both the activities of the school and Kalakshetra productions- from music and jathi composers to persons involved in finding textual sources its editing, those who helped in offering her the sources her lighting technicians, those associated with wardrobe, important guests.

Rukmini Devi 'did not believe that one should attempt to resuscitate the past or to recreate the contemporary world as a replica of it.'<sup>18</sup> She was of the opinion that 'the traditionalists must appreciate that art does not stand still'. She said, 'Look at our temple architecture; here you have the pallava period you also have other periods. Every period has its own art. Art develops of its own accord. It is constantly growing: it doesn't remain frozen in time. The only thing that does not change is the spirit of dedication, the quest for truth, goodness and beauty. As long as that spirit lives on, the forms may change, but good art will still be created in every age.'(Joshi 2001,48) In an Interview to BBC, she made it clear as to what she wanted from her students. She says 'you can take a horse to the water but you can't make it drink. I have given (the students of Kalakshetra) all the opportunities. Let's hope they will take it. It doesn't mean that they should copy exactly what I do because I didn't copy anybody... As long as what is created is something true and beautiful, that's all that matters and I hope that something will come out of it.' (Ramnarayan 1984,38). Her vision was defined, carried forward and enshrined in the institution. She gave a style, a cultural vision and it was the duty of every student of

Kalakshetra to carry it forward and not stop with her ideals or works alone then and there.

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<sup>1</sup> As in programme note of Sabari Moksham, 26<sup>th</sup> Dec 1975, Art festival booklet

<sup>2</sup> All descriptions of angika abhinaya are according to Nandikeshwara's Abhinayadarpana. ed & trnsl Ghosh, Manomohan .1975.

<sup>3</sup> Developed with reference to stage directions in Sweet, Harvey. 1989

<sup>4</sup> Sabari Moksham. 2004. p17

<sup>5</sup> Brochure Sabari Moksham. 1979

<sup>6</sup> Verse and trnsl from Text of Sabhari Moksham. 2004.p23

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.,p27

<sup>8</sup> Brochure. Sabari Moksham. 1979.

<sup>9</sup> Nishaachari is a nocturnal who actively roams about in the darkness of the night. Soorppanakha, here, wanders in the dark forest like a nishaachari.

<sup>10</sup> Kaapu and thandai/silambam are ornaments worn on the wrists and ankles respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Mrinalini Sarabhai remembers seeing Rukmini doing the swan dance (2003,98).

<sup>12</sup> See the Note on *Bhishma* in Nachiappan (2001,21)

<sup>13</sup> Rukmini Devi Arundale. Dance and Music. The Theosophical publishing house, Madras. Undated. Here, she talks of spirituality of dance, of Nataraja as dancer, not of Natyasastra or Nataraja as the deity of Natya sastra and also refers to the war. So this article can be dated to before 1945.

<sup>14</sup> Though there is no evidence available of her having had any training in dance she is supposed to have trained many dancers in theoretical aspects of dance and in abhinaya

<sup>15</sup> See Rukmini's note on Matsya and Kurma avatars.

<sup>16</sup> Programme note on Krishnamari Kuravanji

<sup>17</sup> Programme note on Kannappar Kuravanji

<sup>18</sup> Introductory note on Kalakshetra. 32<sup>nd</sup> Art festival booklet

## Chapter- 4

### Chandralekha: Re-defining boundaries of Dance and the Body

Known as an iconoclast, Chandralekha brought out raw earthly power of dance woven through a tapestry of visual boldness. Her choreographies exude the richness of body language with the stark vividness of latent symbolic energy as she established bold new paradigms for the contemporary Indian dancer. It was her '*Thillana*', from her composition- *Devadasi*, presented at the East-West Dance encounter in 1984 at Bombay that began the process of breaking the canons of 'classicism'. Canons, in which the dancer - the Prima donna 'svelte and graceful with quivering lips, flashy eyelashes and a simpering smile forever waiting for union with her beloved' became a very contemporary woman who comes to terms with the ironies of reality and meets them head-on.

Chandralekha's female dancer who, with an enviable body posture, dances with an honesty and confidence with her head held high, straightened spine, reticent smile and a piercing glance with forceful *adavus*, seems to be reinforcing her irrefutable identity and presence in an otherwise vulnerable, male dominated world. She charges the space around her and makes it pulsate not with her smile but with a resonating energy reminding us of Subramanya Bharati's famous verse in Tamil about *Pudumai Penn* (Modern Woman),



*“Nimirnda nannadai, nerkkonda paarvayum,  
nilatthil yaarkkum anjaada theermayum  
thimirntha gnaana serukkum kondadaal,  
semmai maadar thirambuvadillaiyaam”*

“With an erect stride, unswerving gaze,  
a resolve to fear no one on this land,  
With magnificent pride arising from an abjugated wisdom,  
the women, upright as they are, do not lose their steadfastness”<sup>1</sup>

Speaking at a seminar on Marxism and Aesthetics, Chandralekha (1979) had stated, “One does not have to be a Marxist to apply Marxian aesthetics to this art form to criticize the situation of folk dances existing in this country. Apart from the obvious dislocation from the processes of life, the classical dance forms also exist as ideological vehicles for a class that thrives on nostalgia and mystification of the real content of history. Though one accepts that there is no mechanical relationship between ideology and cultural forms, it has to be said here that art, like religion, has a strong reactionary potential and this has been used as such very consciously even today”

She was commenting on the state of affairs of folk dances in India which, she says is ‘precarious’ given the condition of the state’s promotion and preservation of them reducing them “to be annually presented as euphoric spectacles of governmental creativity during Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi”. Against this, Chandralekha also points out on the existence of classical dance as an ideological vehicle with its baggage of nostalgia and mystification. In this chapter we will see how Chandralekha articulates an alternative aesthetics that is accommodative of a relatively alternate discourse developed on a ‘here and now’ as against what we have seen in the previous chapters on Rukmini Devi or Music Academy on articulating an

oppositional aesthetics on *Sadir* of their times that relied more on the ‘then and now’ dialogue. In seeking the alternate, Chandrlekha analyzed traditional culture of dance from a humanist perspective where tangible reality gained importance and myths and legacies were relegated to the background. As she mentions about this in *Angika’s* choreographer’s notes:

“It is conceived as an alternative to the archaic and decorative image of dance which reduces it to the status of a consumable commodity. The aim is to look at the material origins of dance in India, freed from the trap of ‘divine origin’ theories.”

If myths and god-heads had to be done away with, her concepts received its impetus from a period where humans existed free from these shackles and where importance was not on segregation of society or existence of hierarchy, but an overarching pre-religious vision in the Indian context. A vision in which, referring to dancing in primitive and tribal Indian society, she postulates that ‘Dancing in these early communities was a means of expression as well as a method of building up energy circuits within the body and sharpening the senses’ (1980). Her feelings of inadequacy in the ‘classical’ idiom of Bharatanatyam propelled by leanings towards Marxist aesthetics led her question the commoditization, commercialization and consumerism affecting the dance and the dancer. And she found inspirations from traditions and cultures where man did not reign-in with his supremacy.

Chandrlekha had created dances like *Devadasi* (1959), *Navagraha*, in the early 1970’s where *Devadasi* dealt with the history of the dance form and *Navagraha* explored new concepts that could be visualized outwardly through dance. Her detention during emergency<sup>2</sup>, its effect and incursions on the mind and body and how the body responded by regaining through principle of spine and energizing through dance, and how she began to look at principles

of dance and arts as means for self renewal, to combat the aggression of external forces on one's senses and to regain one's spine-as a metaphor of freedom are values that have permeated her creations in dance. The East-West encounter in 1984 in Bombay was a testing ground for her. It gave her scope- a green signal, out of which she came in full force with *Angika* (1985) where she explored the principles of dance -spine, control, balance, flow- concepts that she felt would strengthen the body through dance and Kalaripayattu, a martial art of Kerala. With *Prana* (1990), yogic asanas were presented with dance to explore breath and enhance understanding of the body in dance.

For Rukmini Devi, Bharatanatyam had been a determiner of tradition –a cultural harbinger of Indian belief system where body was considered a vehicle of culture, its symbol where the choreographed body had to fall in line to express, for example, clarity of lines, body extensions and dramatic expressions of bhakti as prominently displayed in all her productions and performances. Bharatanatyam had become a language to portray the language of bhakti where mythological stories ruled the roost and other myths were invented<sup>3</sup> to sustain its dominance and popularity in a 'classical' realm.

In Chandralekha's works and ideas, she dismantled the cultural specificities that she felt had become attached to dance over a period of time. She worked on the premise that dance belongs to the body- not any individual, religion or caste. It must have occurred as an overriding feeling that had come with a displaced outlook of a Gujarati with a Marxian bent who questioned the necessity to merge her dance to the conservative South Indian culture with its own overtly ritualistic mores. As Kancheevaram silks and traditional temple jewellery were worn with ease, so were stated the body's sense of

belonging as she wore *Bandhini* clothing and silver jewellery<sup>4</sup> of her home state, Gujarat. It was not adapting to new modes or reconciling with the old ones that made their stand, but, as with her ideas in dance about which she said (1991), “My idea is to question everything; to hold everything up to the light of the sun and examine it afresh”, she questioned the view of tradition as a sacrosanct relic of the past. Pointing out critically on the notion of contemporary movement in Indian dance she says: “A contemporary movement in Indian dance can only emerge as an alternative and a counter to the existing situation. It will have to be the product of an honest appraisal of the contradictions and will have to manifest itself as a critique of the rigidity, the static clichés and deadendness of present practice. Dancers will have to respond to realities. Take risk. Shed mental and physical taboos, failed sentimentalism, nostalgia and feudal and frontal values” (1989)

She slowly removed all religious and embellished paraphernalia associated with Bharatanatyam in her works and the dance became minimalistic conveying the body’s language. Her concepts on stage brought dance closer to the body, closer to its principles where the idioms of folk, martial forms or yoga were imbibed to understand this philosophy of body- not by gleaning and covering it up with external embellishments of narratives, jewelry, stage settings, etc- those which according to her distracted from the very purpose of dance that was regeneration. As she succinctly points out:

“What I’m doing in dance today is far removed from the cosmetic and the superficial. I’m talking about the essential meaning of dance in terms of energizing oneself in terms of coping with one’s day-to-day life. I’m interested in the principles of energizing oneself, of generating energy from the body which is a tremendous resource material” (1991)

In Chandrlekha's creations, the power of the body is explored not in terms of human identity that has for ages been premised on the basis of biological differentiation as man or woman. Rejecting sexuality as the primary identity trapped by socio-cultural conditionings, she illustrates alternate ways of understanding maleness and femaleness. (Sexual) Identification that has become a social pre-condition and is being largely metamorphosed in society with gendered tones and stereotypical formats has been questioned by Chandrlekha who bases her ideas of maleness and femaleness as forms of energy inherent in everyone. It can be well seen in her productions how she adapts and humanizes anthropomorphic concepts as enunciated in ancient hindu mythology as Ardhanarishvara or the concept of Sahaja that according to her "is to become one, undivided, undifferentiated, human"<sup>5</sup>.

Rukmini Devi divested Bharatanatyam and the dancing body of its sexuality and upheld the spiritual aspect- the spiritual body. Devadasi's dancing body was a culmination of sexuality, sensuality and spirituality though the society made the body a vortex or a selling point of sexuality. Chandrlekha's dancer's unbent body was consciously chosen to represent 'sexuality' not with respect to /not in terms of the transgressed sexuality of devadasi's body or the so called transcended spiritual dancing body of Rukmini Devi. It was but a transformed triumphant body which became a culmination of the body 'sexual, sensual and spiritual' transforming itself from the mercy of usurpers and rescuers at different times in dance history to proclaim an honest and triumphant holistic body. Like Yvonne Rainer's famous words of negation in performance<sup>6</sup>, Chandrlekha too pronounced her words of negation at the German festival in India, Mumbai. (2001)

"No Male, No Female, No make-up, No Facial expression, No smiles. Erase the face and increase the emotional potential of the body, faces from another

world, expression from another world, no daily mannerisms passing off as abhinaya, no emoting pain and joy not enough to act it but to feel it, opening the body, the parts, the joints little by little in vilambit kala... No props, No crutches, No hooks, No stories, No sentiment, only imagination!”

Chandralekha’s works extending from *Angika* (1985) to *Sharira* (2001), show three areas of focus that developed in her choreographies at different points of time. The first is where the focus had been on Bharatanatyam, its form, explored in close contact with Kalaripayattu in *Angika* (1985) and with Yogic asanas in *Prana* (1990). The form had also been used earlier in portraying the history of Bharatanatyam in *Devadasi* (1959) and to portray mathematical riddles in *Leelavati* (1989). In this phase, the form was used to convey new thematic ventures as well as to investigate and strengthen the structure/form of the dance and the power in the dancing body. In some ways, it could be metaphorically remarked that Prana infused breath and Angika gave strength to the dance and dancing body. Explaining about Bharatanatyam and the importance of the inherent potential of the form, she had remarked: “Bharatanatyam has such structural integrity that it lends itself to abstraction. The understanding of space is integral to the form itself. The square, circle, triangle, diagonal are basic to the dance form. I have used the dynamics of line and curves as well. I have opened the form by creating levels, like a tier of triangles.”



**Fig: 13 Women in *Sri(a)***



**Fig: 14 Women in *Sri(b)***

During the second phase, woman became the theme of her works or the centre of focus with dance becoming a language to convey the subject. These could be seen in works like *Sri* (1991) and *Yantra* (1994). Earlier, she had explored the sense of alienation and mechanization of life confronting a modern day woman in Request Concert<sup>7</sup>, where Bharatanatyam was used to explore a theatrical genre, which she says, was an attempt “at discovering the connection between real movement and abstract movement” (Devika, 1986). In this phase, the form, as such having been explored towards understanding its potential in the previous phase, served now to shed light on concepts of womanhood. In *Sri*, Chandralekha used ancient fertility symbols depicting powerful female images, the women dragging their feet with broken backs who do acts of work “Cleaning Wiping Washing” at “Kitchens, Farms, Factories” and search for their identity (Fig-13,14) in contemporary times and through unresolved re-openings of women’s problems ending with a futuristic vision of woman with many arms- Dashabhuja Durga, an woman with multiple strengths- empowered woman, or realization of the goddess in every woman. In *Yantra*, where dance is built in with a higher degree of abstraction, as Singh (1994) mentions, is a “clear celebration of the female seat of erotica, the Yoni”. It shows numerous diagrams of triangular formations symbolizing the unfolding of the *Srichakra* from the elemental triangle, the *yonis*, centered with the *bindu*, the importance and reverence it holds in an exploration of spirituality. Yantra is a work where the shift occurs from woman’s issues to an exploration of the power of femininity in the body. Reverence or homage to the feminine force is depicted where a male dancer bows to the cardinal points of the female body, the face, breasts, navel, yoni and feet. This sequence is carried forth in her successive works like *Sloka* and *Sharira* too.



Third phase is one in which femininity in the physical body had been the focus where the visual depiction of femininity used dance as appendage to convey the thought. In Raga, the exploration of femininity was supreme and Bharatanatyam lost out as it was done majorly using the Kalari concept of massage. Sloka and Sharira used language of mudras with slow and contained moves that depicted power potential of the body with no rapid shifts of bodies across the proscenium space. Kalaripayattu and yoga had overpowered Bharatanatyam in Chandralekha's last three works. Sharira, being a culmination of all concepts that Chandralekha dealt with throughout her career as a choreographer, contains concepts developed from Angika (1985) onwards through Prana, Sri, Yantra, Mahakaal, Raga and Sloka. To understand how her Chandralekha worked with bodily performance expressions and how her language of body developed, analysis of Prana and Sharira are undertaken here.

#### **4.1 Prana**

In Chandralekha's words *Prana* 'explores the relatedness of breath and movement'<sup>8</sup>. We will look at this statement against the context of the artist's other work, *Navagraha* (1972), which had engaged with the same main concept used in *Prana*. The Navagrahas are:

Sun- Surya

Moon- Soma

Mars- Angaraka

Mercury – Budha

Jupiter – Brhaspati

Venus – Sukra

Saturn – Sani

Eclipses – Rahu and Ketu

As Chandralekha states in her choreographer's note (1990) that Navagraha are "traditionally represented by nine yantras- nine houses- nine geometric forms- the circle, crescent, triangle, droplet, straight line, five pointed star, ring, arrow and arrow head. Surya is seen as the centre of both human and planetary time space having an authority on our body, a claim on our breath." The shapes, though, are slightly different in different sources, they seem to fulfill the requirement of just denoting each graha

#### **4.1.1 Navagraha: Beginning of the Abstract**

The concept of *Navagraha*<sup>9</sup> was as Chandralekha says something that had remained with her for quite some time as she began exploring the possibilities of a new content for dance 'to get out of the dance form and its mechanical repetitiveness'<sup>10</sup>. To explain in brief about the main motif used in this choreography, the nine *Navagraha* deities are usually found in a small, special, square enclosure in every temple. The planetary movements and human affairs present remarkable coincidences and concurrences within repetitive cyclic patterns that make them predictable and this is something that Indian science of Jyothisha is based on. All the imagery and symbolism associated with the Navagrahas like colour, song, qualities, relationship with nature are indicators of how, in the Indian mind, these Navagrahas are not just distant planets, but living presences and influences in their everyday lives, how closely integrated human life is in the cosmic laws of cause and effect.

The *Navagraha* deities are usually positioned in a square and each one's direction of placement is relatively different. Each of these *grahas* seem to convey and project an imaginary sense of a simultaneous rotation and

revolution, that as Chandralekha says is ‘a movement-in-the-round’ when one starts circumambulating the deities. Apparently, the act of circumambulating itself propels a multi-centric motion involving the individual, each *graha* and all the nine *grahas* both independently and with respect to each other. This action also helps one comprehend the relative position and potential of human element with regard to the larger cosmic dynamics. According to Chandralekha, the *Navagrahas* reflect a ‘highly organized, harmonious’<sup>11</sup> concept of space which is what she tries to explore in almost all of her choreographic works by looking at different possibilities of shaping, charging, acting and reacting to space by making it active and alive.

Various events surrounding an artist influence the creation of an art work. In Chandralekha’s case, her ideas on the concept of *Navagraha* seemed to have got reinforced by other sources through which she could relate to *Navagraha*, for example, the Indian temple tank architecture or the ‘Homage to the Square’ series paintings of Josef Albers<sup>12</sup>. She had also begun exploring the scope of its graphic geometry through *kolams*, and posters<sup>13</sup>. During this time, she had spent a year abroad when she traveled across Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Greece, London, France and America meeting and collaborating with artists, film directors, activist groups, visiting museums, art galleries and theatre plays. It can be understood that her stay and travel was replete not only with American films, Shakespeare or the Royal ballet, but also with Merce Cunningham, Museum of Modern Art, experimenting with art and technology and other creative activities which sustained and kindled her proactive mind.

The active moon missions of 1966 by Soviet Union and US when spacecrafts Luna 9 and Surveyor 1 of the respective countries landed on the moon and

transmitted thousands of images of the terrain followed by the manned mission with Neil Amstrong who first stepped out on the Moon in 1969, would have possibly created a strong impression about the relative constructs of space and time. This, she explored in the second half of *Navagraha* and in *Prana*. To be an artist also requires one to be socio-culturally and politically aware and this consciousness played strongly in her decision to travel ‘just to see the world, just to see how artists are coping with their life, their social, political problems and how the political, social groups see art’<sup>14</sup>. This period was also witness to wars and active radical movements like ‘Vietnam, the feminist movement, the beginning of the civil rights movement’ which were re-writing the history and politics of the world. Amongst these, she found all the artists expressing themselves in a strong way. A pronounced receptiveness to the free flow of innumerable ideas propelled her to proceed with a revitalized energy to pursue practicing and choreographing once she was back in India.

‘*Navagraha*’ had an adaptation of the yogic *Surya Namaskar* as the first section that she performed to the lines of Muthuswami Dikshitar’s *Suryamurthe*, a hymn on the sun god. Chandralekha was “restating the yogic suryanamaskar at a different pace/beat and different tension”<sup>15</sup>. Bharucha (1995, 90-91) sees it as an ‘almost infinitesimal transformation of yoga into dance’ which ‘is more like an inner passage of movement, a yogic flow of energy’ that ‘suffuses Chandralekha’s being’ with an ‘inner radiance’ towards the end of the namaskar. He says that Chandralekha dances this piece at a far end of the stage, almost at a ‘vanishing point’ where

‘...with a slow, hieratic movement of the hands, the body rotates through half-circles and quarter-circles. The relentlessly slow ‘flow’ of the movement is punctuated with micro-rhythms, so that each turn of the body seems somewhat fragmented. It is through a series of tiny jerks that the rotation is completed”.

It is necessary for us to understand that such an experiment of performing yoga to the strains of '*Suryamurthe*' shows the beginnings of a change in Chandralekha's outlook towards dance and its concepts both with regard to an exploration of a different space- time configuration and in interlinking concepts of physical arts and dance. The duet, which followed this solo, was performed by both Chandralekha and Kamdev to jathis composed by Chandralekha's guru, Ellappa Pillai. The interplay between 'human' and 'cosmic' elements, represented by Chandralekha and Kamdev respectively, synergized, in Bharucha's (1995, 89) view, to explore their 'interaction, meeting and separation'. She talks of 'unpredictable things' that began to happen where she would 'approach Kama with tremendous speed almost going into him' and then find her 'own bearings'. Her abstract notions on space, time, energy, rhythm, body or bodies within performing space seemed to have got formulated and visualized from this stage onwards. In her search for a new form and new content, she had found yoga and for her, Bharatanatyam form itself 'received a new charge by juxtaposing it with the tensile energy of yoga'. This turns out to be the initial step in Chandralekha's exploration of linkages between physical arts starting with yoga and dance. The concepts which emerged from these linkages were what Chandralekha carried throughout all her choreographic works. Her experiments aimed at inscribing or embodying these concepts on the dancers. It evolved as an internalizing process which tried developing a different body language for the dancer, mainly the female dancer.

#### **4.1.2 Navagraha as Prana**

Chandralekha, in one of her remarks about the concept of *Prana* in her choreography says:

“Prana relates to Sun and Moon in our bodies; their rhythm and movement, their vital significance for self renewal”<sup>16</sup>

In yogic terms, *prana* is understood as life, breath or vital or bio-energy or in other terms as the essence of the whole universe. The ‘sun and the moon in our bodies’ that Chandralekha mentions refers to the *pingala* and the *ida* nadis<sup>17</sup> in our body which are psychic pathways through which *prana* flows in order to awaken and activate the *kundalini* which then travels through the *sushumna nadi* to stimulate various charkas of the body and help to experience/reach higher states of consciousness or levels of mind.

Chandralekha sees *prana* as the ‘all pervasive life breath, a communicating link between our body and cosmos’. It is the role of *prana* as the ‘communicating link’ on which Chandralekha situates her demand for a greater meaningful dialogue on the body. The body is seen here as an all powerful communicating link, a potential source which has the capacity to be vibrant, active, aware, dignified and honest in its interaction with other bodies, with the society and with the world at large.

She says, ‘In our times prana is depleted. The breath has become short in our body; in our world’. Prana or the life force has come close to becoming lifeless. In an increasingly fast paced world, Chandralekha finds a greater need to emphasize upon the seemingly simple but vital concept of breath. As can be seen in this work she confronts the shortness of breath in our body and in our world’ by countering it both symbolically and literally through usage of slowed movement with an elongated and controlled breathing of yoga asanas juxtaposed with elaborated three speeds of basic adavus of Bharatanatyam. The slowing down of movement accompanied by a sustained powerful breathing conceptually opposed the fast paced breathless execution of jathis of the contemporary ‘classical’ Bharatanatyam performance. When

she talks of 'Prana' as a journey towards 'recovery of breath', it not only means literally controlling and expanding the breath through using concepts of yoga in dance for performance, it also means in its metaphoric sense a recovery of the breath of dance- the life force of dance which fills it with throbbing live energy to move away and reject 'cosmetic' stagnant concepts of classical dance which relegate the dancers to mere passive recipients or objects of adoration and commercial exploitation.

In order that the body become a responsible communicating link and not become dead or passive it is imperative to bring back, to respond to and energise breath, to energise ourselves. The concern about prana and revitalizing the prana in our body takes different paths and conveys many meanings; taking time to breathe, sensitize the mind, open up the body of its hidden spaces, negated spaces, reclaiming the power in our body through dance, through understanding our spine. These are considerably problematic areas which re-look at the body of the dancer and her dance and address issues of body politics of the dancer in and out of the framework of performance. Now, let us proceed towards an analysis of the performance.

#### **4.1.3 Analysis of *Prana***

Prana is performed by comprising of nine dancers consisting of eight Bharatanatyam dancers and one yoga exponent. Some of the major constituents of this choreographic work that can be noticed include the following: It has breath as its important constituent exercised or controlled through the practice of asanas; adavus performed to varying speeds; Images of shapes or yantras attributed to navagrahas and their placement; Usage of Muthuswami Dikshitar's Navagraha kritis and sollukattus.

Now let us look at the work<sup>18</sup> in detail. The performance begins in complete silence. Gradually a spot light appears on a male dancer positioned in *sirsasana* at centre stage. Eight other dancers come in and lie supine around the central dancer facing the direction of the icons as in *Navagraha* iconography. They gradually move to *Shalabhasana* and slowly move their arms forward to an extended *anjali*. Simultaneously the central dancer does an *anjali* with his legs. The choreography thus begins as a salutation to the Sun, Moon and various other cosmic elements and their energies within us and surrounding us. The eight dancers disperse with simple *chalanam* after which the music of morsing and mridangam start coming in. The dancer in the centre then takes up *Veerabhadrasana* with folded palms and arms extended forward creating an image of a spatial movement of surya piercing through the darkness at the break of dawn. He is closely followed by seven dancers who slowly advance from backstage with *preritha saranam*. Kothari (1993) sees this sequence as ‘Surya racing across the skies in his seven horse chariot’. Now the dancer at the centre does a *Hanumanasana* and opens up his extended *anjali* arms evoking the image of the sun rising on the horizon spreading his resplendent rays. The *Hanumanasana* with an opening up of arms positioned perpendicular to an extended split of the legs on the floor is suggestive of the opening up of body, the hidden energy points, its interstices, on a journey which tries to visualize the power and potency of the human body as *Prana*-life force, quintessence of how Chandralekha has tried to start her dialogue with ‘*Prana*’. This sequence, apart from becoming ‘homage to Sun’ as Barucha prefers to describe, means a lot more. Through the perfectly poised and balanced *Veerabhadrasana*, with a straight glance, we understand that the dancer has found his centre. And the slow and steady usage of flow of breath has enabled him find a proper alignment of his body centre.



The primacy Chandralekha gives to the depiction of spine in dance can be prominently visualized in the next sequence which is performed to a rendering of “*Suryamurthe namosthute...*” (*saurashtra raga; chaturashra dhruva talam*) sans any accompaniment by a solo dancer. The dancer has legs extended sideways but firmly placed on the ground which she brings back to sama only at the end of the song. The viewer can feel the centrality of the spine with the spine acting as an axle supporting the movement of the radials- head, hands and legs. The navel becomes the axis point wherefrom movements originate and end. In totality there is a sense of rootedness with the unchanging position of the feet but at the same time a radiating force from the centre of the body expressed through the stretch and expansion of the spine, torso and arms all visibly expressed through this simple movement. It subscribes to the idea of body as *mandala* which Chandralekha so strongly believes in and incorporates in her works.

Chandralekha (1990, 95) understands the concept of *Mandala* mentioned in *Natyasastra* as a concept where ‘*Sharira* or body itself becomes the *mandala*, the tense centre of an expanding cosmos’, ‘a dynamic principle linking inner space with outer space’ - a sort of microcosm trying to express itself effectively in a larger macrocosm. The image of the circular sun of the *navagraha yantra* seems to get superscribed through the spatial movement of the limbs.

As this demonstration ends, a group of eight dancers enter the stage to the music of flute, morsing and mridangam. Dancers come on stage from different side wings as the sollukattu starts. The sollukattu goes like this:

Ta ; ta ri ta da na | | ta ; da na ta ja nu | | ta ; ja nu ta di mi | |

Ta ; di mi ta ki ta || ta ; ta jam, ta ka || jam ; , ta ta ri ta ||

da na ta ja nu ta di mi || ta jam ; ta , dari kita taka ||

It is sung in three speeds like a trikala theermanam but without an arudhi at the end. Dancers enter the stage doing different nattadavus. If one dancer starts with 3<sup>rd</sup> nattadavu, then fifth nattadavu, followed by sixth, other dancer starts with sixth and then does seventh then eighth. So we find eight dancers doing five different adavus (three, five, six, seven and eight) at eight different positions at all times. The adavus are performed to the linear progressing speed of the sollukattu. A sense of harmony prevails throughout as there are neither multi-rhythmic phrases with different dancers taking different speeds at the same moment nor cross rhythms with gati bedham. The sollu and adavus are clean and simple as they proceed with a nonchalant chaturashra rhythm throughout. Though they appear randomly placed, every dancer follows a predetermined specific path that is straight, cuts only at right angles to change direction and traverses across the positions of Navagraha iconography. Each dancer seems to proclaim an empowering individuality through their markedly different positions though they never take oppositional paths with forceful or conflicting overtones. This movement across the stage is metaphorical of the cosmic movement of planets orbiting in a galaxy, each traversing their own orbits with a harmonious blend. Through the entire sollukattu, space gradually gets charged up through the multidimensional dynamics of steady adavus.

The next in the series of Navagrahas is the Soma or Moon depicted by the crescent shaped Yantra. Ragam Asaveri in talam chaturashra matya is played to the strings of veena, when two dancers- a man and a woman come on stage. We notice that the number of dancers who perform to the songs representing each graha correspond to their position in the week. The two

dancers sit facing each other and come down to Bhujangasana from where they perform an adaptation of Vasishtasana. The transition is extremely slow paced based on exhalation and inhalation which is smooth and controlled in vilambit kala. The body of the dancers who balance the entire line of their body from head-torso and legs till the toes with one single arm and its palm placed perpendicular and firmly on the ground with the other arm extended in the same line conveys a heightened sense of balance and control required not only to perform the asana but also as qualities necessary for any Bharatanatyam dancer. The semicircle of the yantra depicting moon is created through the curve of Bhujangasana or the imaginary crescent which forms along the angle between the raised arm and toes of Vasishtasana.

After both the dancers move away from the stage, again the group of dancers appear to the lines of sollukattu:

Ta, di, nuta dimi ta, hata jam, tari | |

; di, nuta dimi ta, hata jam, tari | |

jam, tharita jagatha kita jana janata ku | |

kum tarita tarita danata tajjam, tadi kita taka | |

If the previous sollukattu had all the nattadavus till eighth, this sollukattu has all the three Tha tei tei tha's which come next in the order of Bharatanatyam adavus. Here too the sollukattu and adavus are sung and performed to gradually progressing speeds from first to third. Some of them start with first, some with second tha tei tei tha and others with the third. As in the previous sollukattu, there are no multi-rhythms or cross- rhythms and the adavu progression is smooth. Only difference is that though the dancers totaling nine start from the navagraha positions, take a circular path around

the same position thrice before joining a larger circle. This whole exercise which is repeated twice can be compared to rotation and revolution of the planets on their orbit. There is no professed linearity or right angle cuts as found in the previous sollukattu which followed the depiction of surya. The contrast from linearity to roundedness is striking. It can be understood that the angular sharpness of the lines across the stage for the sollukattus of surya evoked the sharp piercing rays of the sun whereas the curves, semicircles of tha tei tei tha, flex of the torso and parabolic feet patterns in the next sollukattu which follows Soma was meant to have a more soothing and gentle countenance reflecting coolness generally associated with moon. But it should be noted that this feel is not brought out by making the adavus more curvaceous or relaxed or loosened. The energy flow of a steady spine or the radiating strength through the aramandi and circularly precise movement of the arms and feet pattern bring out the power of centripetal magnetic forces exerted by the moon.

The next scene is the depiction of Angaraka or Mars, the red planet of the solar system. It is represented by a trikona or triangle yantra. Three dancers are revealed as a spotlight falls on the stage centre. Positioned with two dancers facing back and the frontal dancer representing the apex of the triangle, they slowly start moving out their sama feet till a triangle is formed with their lower bodies. Now the song begins: “aHNgArakam AshrayAmy ahaM....” sung in ragam surati and talam Rupakam.

In this sequence, arms are gradually brought close to the chest and then extended forward when simultaneously the torso is also bent forward. As the bent torso reaches a position parallel to the floor, the neck is extended to bring the face forward and arms are bent in an anjali formed below the face.

The symmetry of the triangles that seem to grow on the stage with each move throws upon the audience the splendor of inherent geometric integrity of the human body expressed with a subtle force. The profusion of triangles with its brimming energy quotient seems to scatter the serene vilambit kala of the performance creating a feel of 2D and 3D triangles swiveling across the stage

Usi is done for the sollukattu that follows the song on Angaraka. The sequence does not start from the Navagraha positions as in the jathis seen before but from a central vertical line across the stage where dancers are in a line standing face to face or opposite to each other . As the adavu performed here is usi, each person next to the other takes opposite directions and converge at the same position. There are also other dynamics of usi that play upon the performance space: forces of repulsion and attraction that take one body away from the other and bring them together again; movements and bodies poised at a relatively different space and distance but which appear to be one to a distant observer, and creation of overlapping moves over a same duration of time. Each sollukattu, as we have seen in the earlier two cases, conveys a different idea and projects a distinctness in terms of: stage dynamics, energy distribution highlighted by the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the dancer's bodies on stage through Bharatanatyam nritta and Yogasanas, the need to understanding and thus visualizing concepts of control, balance and flow as inherent or latent vital capacities of the body that need to be exploited and finally, connecting to a concept that can be related to the depiction of graha in certain ways and at the same time providing the intended body language for the dancers.

The next in the row of Navagrahas is Budha or Mercury depicted by its Yantra shaped as a droplet. The arms of the dancers in Vrikshasana

resemble the shape of a droplet. If we look at Vrikshasana as therapeutic asana, we understand as Venkata Reddy states (1992, 42) that 'regular practice of Vrikshasana relieves stiffness of the joints, of the feet, ankles and knees, strengthening of the muscles of the legs and lessening arthritic pains'. But, as is the case with every other asana that is used to depict the grahas, there seems to be no connection between the asana and the graha. It is just the shape of Yantra denoting a graha that is evoked through the similar shaped body line of an asana. Abhinayadarpanam provides gestures symbolizing the attributes of Navagrahas. Likewise, here, it is the shape of every asana or the positioning of dancers on the stage that is suggestive of the symbolic shape of each Graha. So, the usage of specific asanas are at the most only denotative. Importance is given to asanas and adavus at their conceptual level, in the sense that it is a certain feel experienced by the dancer's body while performing the asana or adavu that is of primary importance. The concepts are more experiential and less theoretical or literal. Same is the case with the number of dancers depicting each graha. This too is denotative of the day of the week that the graha represents.

As Vrikshasana is a one leg stand, the mere doing of the asana requires the dancer to have a perfect spinal posture, a good balance and control over breath, movement of limbs without jerks and the smooth flow of energy to sustain the movement for some time. It is a two way action as it requires a good amount of concentration to hold this asana and at the same time enables one to achieve concentration with continuous practice of the asana. Though, performing Vrikshasana for the depiction of Budha and linking it with Navagraha concept serves the purpose of representing the concept choreographically on stage, it is also meant to serve the choreographer's purpose of finding effective concepts of body language from the usage of other physical arts like Yoga in performing and understanding Bharatanatyam.

Ultimately, for Chandralekha, what mattered was exploring the power of dance to help us “remain whole to hold ourselves together and make the body a medium between the earth and the sky”(Chandralekha, 1990,95) at times suggested through images like Vrikshasana with the arms reaching out towards the sky and legs firmly placed on the earth. The focus was on developing a body language for which different themes of performance serve as a basic infrastructure. Chandralekha, as Padmini says, ‘had a much more holistic kind of approach to body. She was really interested in the body to understand something and not just the body to comment or mindlessly imitate something’<sup>19</sup>. And Chandralekha herself was, ‘not trying to entertain anybody or provide a compendium of information’. She was, ‘working with a tremendously controlled slowness of movement and a deep meditative mood’ which as she says (1991, 28-29) ‘generates from a need to know intimately the comprehensive principle of breath, of breathing, which holds all movement together.’

Let us proceed to Brihaspathi or Jupiter. Jupiter is represented as straight line in its Yantra imagery. All through Prana, we have seen various concepts of the body emerging and gaining prominence. These include: the rooted and radiating body as Mandala shown through Surya, the flexibility and stretch of the curved spine in Soma, the perfectness and profuseness of inherent trikonas of the body expressed in Angaraka, the inbuilt control and balance of a body reaching for the sky but at the same time gaining its strength from earth felt through Vrikshasana in Budha and now, the straight line of Brihaspati, portrayed by an erect spine as the potential hold or source of power.

Five girls enter the stage and occupy their positions. Four of them sit cross legged in Gomukhasana with their backs to the audience. One girl comes a little forward and sits facing the audience. She then does an Ardhalasana with arms slowly taken to the sides appearing perpendicular to her bent torso. She then gradually opens out her legs horizontally to bring each toe near the arm. The dancers with their legs in Gomukha and backs to the audience do not show any other movement till end of the song. Their faces are turned back and are invisible but this does not mean they are inactive or faceless. The erect and taut spine is enough to suggest a steady, resounding vibration emanating from an apparently still pose. It is their spine that appears to speak instead of their faces. The final picture which comes across is not simply about five dancers attempting to do asanas, some Gomukhasana and the other, an adaptation of Halasana. The final picture which can be visualized has more to do about the metaphor of spine which Chandralekha sees as a 'metaphor of freedom'- the strong perpendicularity of the spine to the stage, to the earth and the inherent capacity of the dancer's body to remain erect, unflattened, unwavering by the social conditioning of an inherited past, uniqueness of every individual among the faceless millions to charge the space around, to become agents of change in a society, to revive the energy of the spine and not just remain faceless. As Chandralekha reduces some of her works to show bare basic moves not usually associated with being prominently displayed in classical Bharatanatyam, that too in vilambit kala, it becomes clear that her works are more about bringing an awareness of oneself, one's body and mind and bringing about an understanding of, as Chandralekha states, (1991, 28-29) 'how to stand, how to sit and how to move with the spine and understand the meaning and complexity involved in the economy of movements and to constantly refine this'.



The Sollukattu following Brihaspathi comprises of the Nattadavus that comes next in the order in Bharatanatyam lessons- the Tha tei tam series. All the four Tha tei tams are performed by five dancers. The line of Brihaspathi as represented by its Yantra can be perceived by the horizontal lines created across the stage by bodies with perpendicular torsos which hold an erect spine. They move across the stage from left to right and right to left standing one behind the other and performing to a same rhythm with ascending tempo (first speed and then second speed). The horizontal parallel lines formed by bodies placed at equidistance and moving across the stage resemble the overhead power lines. In this case, it does not just remain a visual imagery but expresses the flow of energy emanating from bodies moving end to end across the performance space to form simple horizontal lines. It is a sequence which suggests charging up of the potential latent energy of the body, gaining of momentum to express its kinetic power through movements and then extending this flow to charge up the space around. Speaking about charging space, Padmini says, “Chandralekha was not only looking at bodies. The whole idea was of charging space within the bodies, charging the choreographic space. Charging space meant that all the time, with every movement one was concerned with pushing this space”<sup>20</sup>. One can come across the line of Brihaspathi as represented by its Yantra in the horizontal lines created across the stage by bodies with perpendicular torsos holding an erect spine.

The next graha in line is Sukra or Venus which is represented as a pentagon or a five pointed star. A group of six dancers- five placed around one dancer, evoke the imagery of an active centre channeling its core energy through the five pointed ends. The star Venus is generally associated with feminine concept. It does not however seem possible to be visualized as a “nuanced femininity of the ‘starlike’ Sukra” as mentioned by Bharucha (1995, 231).

Visualized through the movement of the limbs, shape of the body and bodies in totality, the image formed when the dancers around raise their pelvis to balance their bodies on the arms does seem to create a 3D image of an upturned triangle or chalice which is symbolic of the female

Now let us move on to analysis of Sani or Saturn. Sani comes seventh in the order of the week and so is represented by seven dancers and its Yantra, the shape of semi circle. To the rendering of “divAkaratanujaM shanaishcaraM” in Ragam, Yadukula Kambhoji and set to caturashra eka talam, seven dancers come on stage and six of them position themselves semi circularly at the back of a dancer standing at the centre. All the six dancers at the back lie supine and slowly raise their arm upwards and then bend them to place their palms on the ground beside their necks . Simultaneously the dancer at the centre forms an Ardhashakrasana or Sethubhandasana . When the dancer at the centre rests her torso, the others around her come to ardhashakrasana (Fig-30). When they go down, the central dancer comes up and goes down again. This reveals the image of Saturn with the central dancer showing the sphere of the planet and others representing Saturn’s ring. All of them come to cross legged seated positions, get up, take a circle around their position and disperse. The manner of making a fast paced ayatakuttana around one’s own position to move out to disperse and the style and pace of getting up from a seated position to sama are two actions which are typical of Chandralekha’s choreographies. These are used for transiting from one scene to another or before proceeding out of the stage. The second movement mentioned here is an interesting one. From any seated position, the dancer bends her knees and crosses them over her chest. The arms are also crossed near her ankles or knees. Now, in a swift move, she thrusts both her legs forward like a forward kick, places the feet on the ground and pushes herself up to sama position. All this is done in one go, very swiftly. The

purpose of elaborating on this action is to understand how Chandralekha's concepts become embodied and ingrained even in such simple transitional moves reflected in the body language of the dancers. The strength to push the body from a seemingly inertia, to propel it forward and up is gained from a precisely timed strong inhalation, the force and tension that is built from a strong pelvic area. This strength and power in the pelvis that is obtained and realized again from the dancer's erect seated position which enables a steady flow of Prana through an erect spine.

Shifting to the last Graha in the order of Navagrahas, the sequence showing Ketu proceeds in the following manner. Both Rahu and Ketu are eclipses and are represented as arrow and arrowhead Yantras. Ushtrasana is done to show the arrow or Rahu and Dhanurasana is used in the depiction of Ketu. Dhanurasana literally means bow-pose where the body resembles a bow. To the song "mahAsuraM kEtumahaM" in ragam, Chaamaram and Rupaka talam, eight dancers come on stage and position themselves diagonally across from the left front stage. All of them gradually come to Dhanurasana. The bow thus formed of the spine and legs is held taut by the tensile strong string of the arms. It is the picture of an arrow-head ready for launch any moment just with the release of the string. It is the Asana that evokes the image of Ketu's Yantra. The line of dancers positioned in Dhanurasana reinforces forces of tension, relaxation; the lines, curvatures of the torso, limbs and spine; the flow of breath, its vilambit inhalation and exhalation which enables smoothness of movements.

In Navagraha, the earlier version of Prana, the closing sequence was a Namaskar to Surya which was done by Chandralekha in a traditional Chau Namaskar style. In Prana, the last sequence of Namaskar was changed to

make it more elaborate than its precursor. It did not use Chau but Kalaripayattu. This particular composition was specially choreographed for the inauguration of Festival of India in USSR in 1986. It was done by Bharatanatyam dancers and martial artists who had earlier performed in Chandralekha's Angika. The Namaskar of Prana has eight dancers, four entering the stage diagonally from the front left end and four from the right back end. The movements in vilambit kala are performed to the sollu of Pusphanjali. But what is done here is not Pushpanjali which is usually done by Bharatanatyam dancers as the first item of their repertoire. Chandralekha uses the sollu of Pushpanjali to depict Namaskaram in an entirely different format. According to Bharucha (1995, 191), the choreography of the work 'was not naturalistic but iconic in its salutation to land, salutation to people, salutation to elements, cosmos'.

So, in what way was this salutation worked out? Namaskar had Kalari movements set to vilambit pace for the sollu of Pushpanjali and the movements were an adaptation of Poothara vandhanam<sup>21</sup> done before Meipayattu<sup>22</sup> in the practice of Kalaripayattu. Now let us look at the original context of this thozhal or vandanam as done in a Kalari. The kalari vandanam forms an inherent part of the daily learning process. This includes the act of bowing (*atmasamarpanam*- self-surrender) at the *Poothara*, *Ganapathi thara*, *Guru peetam* and *Guru paadam* (Guru's feet) after the disciple enters the kalari and starts doing any payattu. Infact, even every Meipayattu and Anga Payattu<sup>23</sup> have their own unique moves of vandanam before beginning of each of its adavus. Apart from the practice of Kalaripayattu which in itself is a powerful source for disciplining the body and mind, activities like the kalari vandanam and other simple acts like entering the kalari with right leg, supposedly indicative of one's reverence to

the kalari space that one is entering, also contributes to this disciplining process.

Questions of the choreographer's area of focus, what she tries to convey, the adaptations made and what finally is being conveyed are key matters that need to be analysed when this vandanam is taken to a performance arena. In contemporary practice of 'classical' Bharatanatyam, the dancer performs a small invocatory item in which she pays her respects to a particular deity or Gods in general, to her Guru and the audience and offers flowers as an act symbolic of offering her dance to them. Pushpanjali is usually set to medium or fast tempo. It comprises of only sollus or simple jathi accompanied by a few verses. Initially adopted from the temple tradition of the devadasis where it was either performed or just sung as part of Purvaranga to pay obeisance to gods to invoke their blessings at the start of the performance and was more a private affair not done before the audience before the actual beginning of the performance. It later began to be adapted to be performed on the sabha/proscenium stage. Here it became an act of performance in which the contemporary 'classical' dancer in all her bejeweled finery prominently 'displayed' her devotion or religious affiliation by offering the flowers at the feet of a deity whose idol or photo was kept at the left front corner of the stage. This act was part of 'temple-stage aesthetics' where the theatre stage began to be seen symbolic of a temple.

In Chandralekha's Pushpanjali, though Bharatanatyam adavus had been used for sollukattus that follow the yogic representation of the grahas in Prana, Bharatanatyam language itself is not used for the pushpanjali portion. Chandralekha had replaced this with a body language of Kalaripayattu as she had again negated all possibilities of having anything to

do with the format of repertoire as such. Namaskar had contrasting moves compared to pushpanjali with a body language where there was none of the bending of the torso as an act of bowing towards any one mainly the audience as it had moves that were directed towards the sides with one group facing the other and not the audience.

In the case of traditional Kalaripayattu too, vandanam was an essential ingredient as we have seen earlier. As it is a martial art form not really meant for performance on stage, it had none of the acts of display and was more of an internalized process. But here, in Namaskaar, this martial art too underwent changes as does any art when displaced from its original context. The usual quick moves became long drawn out in vilambakala where the focus mainly came upon the language of body rather than becoming an act of obeisance or salutation to an external body or agent. It was the flex and the extensions of the torso, arms, legs, spine which became more pronounced and clearer. For the audience it was these aspects of the new body language that was emphasized and for the dancer herself it was the ultimate potential and power of the body that were saluted. Moreover with the diagonal positioning of the two groups at the end of Namaskaar, it was a mutual obeisance to each other's bodies, its energy and power that took centre stage.

The final gestural image that is formed after this action is retrospective in the sense that it is a depiction through attributes at each navagrahas positions of in Bharatanatyam hasta attributes by dancers in Aindra mandala with surya in garudasana at the centre. This image takes shape with the rendering of the slokam to appease all the navagrahas.

“Arishtani pranashyanthu dhuritaani bhayaanicha

Shanthirastu subham grahaha kurvanthu mangalam”

## 4.2 Sharira

The feminine force of fertility, regeneration and power have been portrayed in Chandrlekha's productions at different instances as 'Shakambari', 'Naravahana' (Fig-15) and 'Dasabhuja'. Sharira is an ode to the feminine force, the female –as an 'abode of Primal energy' and the ascending Shakti'. Sharira is a culmination of all the concepts that Chandrlekha had dealt with throughout her career as choreographer. It contains concepts developed from Angika (1985) onwards through Prana, Sri, Yantra, Mahakaal, Raga and Sloka. Like Yvonne Rainer's famous words of negation in performance (Rainer 1965,178), Chandrlekha too pronounced her words of negation at the German festival in India, Mumbai in 2001:

....no props.. no crutches  
..no hooks.. no stories  
no sentiment... only imagination



**Fig: 15**  
**Naravahana**

“Bharatanatyam is moving away from me” she told me<sup>24</sup>. Sharira her last work did not have any significant Bharatanatyam movement except for the mandala positions. Abhinaya had left her long ago; Now nritya too seems to have departed. The body began to find its own movement to sway to its own rhythm.

The performance of Sharira<sup>25</sup>, as in all the other works of Chandralekha, begins with her choreographer’s note or prologue. The darkness, after the prologue, gives way to a white spot surrounded by a blue luminescence, seemingly an effervescent moon or an all powerful yet subtle bindu<sup>26</sup>. Image of a dancer emerges as a ray of light falls on her- face doing an incoherent but brisk up and down moves. She is on all fours with left leg slowly raised to form Chakravaka<sup>27</sup> pose. A similar set of swift jerky moves done by the head and the raised leg in unison portrays a bird in incessant turmoil before it slowly languors back to a condition of inconsolableness. Chakravaka, are water birds of which the male and female are regarded as a pattern of conjugal love but, as myth may have it, it is believed to be doomed for separation in the night and longs for it to be day. Apparently, the motif of Chakravaka has been a favorite with Chandralekha since Lilavati and Mahakal<sup>28</sup> and later in Sloka and Sharira. Chandralekha, in correlating its feelings of angst, turmoil and a passionate search for its partner, conveys a similar situation in Sharira, where the human mind is inexorably engaged in a search for understanding the vicissitudes that appears in the path of one’s journey in life. Subsequent to this, the dancer performs a Shashankasana, that, apart from being a complementary asana performed to extend and relax the spine, is also metaphoric of the passage of time in such an endeavor similar to the time cycle signified by the moon (Shashanka) in its waxing and waning.



The dancer creates a split from where for almost fifteen minutes, the audience is taken through a journey, in which Chandralekha says, the 'subtle body is invoked through charged language of ritual hasta mudras which simultaneously cleanse and empower' (2001a). The strings of the tanpura begin to play as the legs open in to a split.

'.... the horizontally outstretched Pathaka hands come forward..... closer towards the chest forming Shikara seated on Pathaka which then encircles the Shikara...igniting....

to produce sparks of Tripathaka which rise ....

into a jwala above the head.....opening into an Alapadma...

....a Padma with its petals reaching far and wide,

...Alapadma that seems to extend beyond the proscenium towards the audience.

This was the feeling I had the first time I watched Padmini Chettur positioned in an extended split with her hastas which appeared to come alive encircling her and the viewer at the same moment. That a dancer could charge the space even with simple but strongly held hand gestures and immaculately worked out movements in *ati-vilambit kala* was being felt tremendously<sup>29</sup>. It felt true to her belief that the energy that moves from the spine 'has the power to generate other's energy' and 'will be created in the audience as well'<sup>30</sup>. Apart from steady energy dynamics, her tough positioning- settled, but with pulsating echoes, quadruples the effect choosing to underplay the virtual concessions available of an ostentatious and spacey stage circumference. The solo dancer, directly facing the audience, seems ready to engage in a confrontation through bodily dialogues. With an unwavering glance fixed on the onlooker, she appears to redefine notions of femininity. For the audience, the focus now need-basedly only upon the dancer, voluntarily or involuntarily, are brought within the fold of the dancer's and conclusively upon the choreographer's experience. Potent

articulations of the hands traverse intensely intimate pathways along the centres of the torso. The flourish of the arousing passions bursting in to a thousand petalled flower are journeys which simulate an introspection and awakening within every individual to tread the along pathways which appears at once explicitly fiery and serenely meditative.

The open split position is literally evocative of Chandralekha's concept of 'opening the body- the parts, the joints little by little in vilambit kala' to 'increase the emotional potential of the body... not enough to act it but to feel it' (2001b) or an opening in the metaphoric sense where, as Padmini says, the 'dancers own relationship with the body became very honest and the female body could now open itself' <sup>31</sup> in relation to its own sensitivities and sensibilities. As the split is not a natural position for anyone to continue beyond a limited time, it is also reflective of the demands that such a posture exerts on the dancer. Its reasoning can be better understood from Chandralekha for whom Bindu, in conceptual terms, is caused by 'unity in body' that provides a 'focus' and a 'capacity for stillness without rigor mortis' that in turn is due to a 'constantly moving dynamic centre even if still'(1990). Padmini, the dancer who performed this section explains her practical experience of performing from such a split thus: "It is difficult to sit in the position and channel energy through the body because you are purely relying on spine energy and then not to get stiff and to keep the energy flowing out through the feet and through the hand." <sup>32</sup>

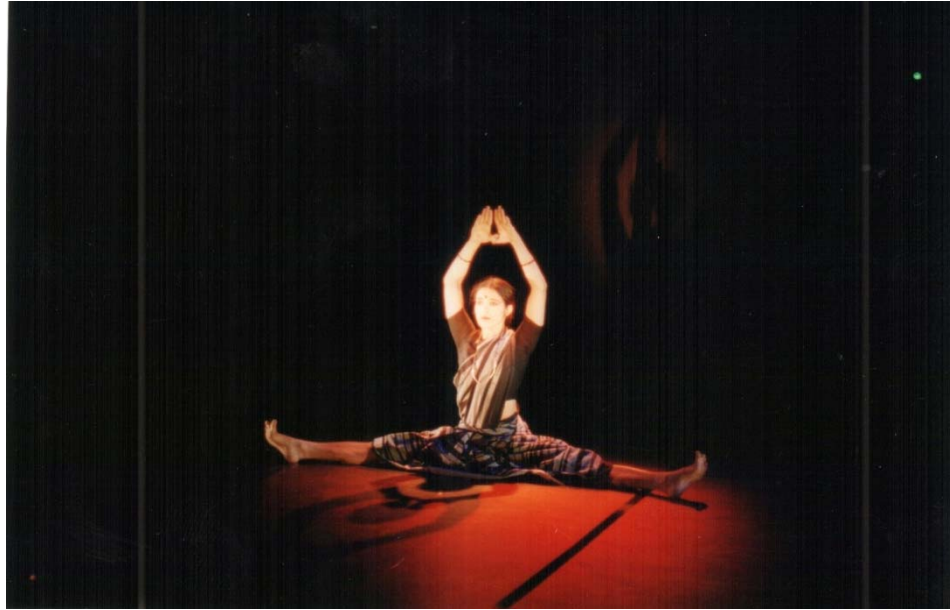
An aalaap that rises at the consummation of the shikara and pathaka forming linga-yoni- Shivalinga, gradually moves towards an enduring exposition of lyrics in Drupad style of Hindustaani, sung by the Gundecha brothers which go- "*Jagata janani..jwalamukhi*" in raga Hindolam. A triangle

is formed between two palms joined at the thumb suggestive of the shape of triangular yoni mudra (Fig-16). From this is created a vajrajwala or agnisala mudra<sup>33</sup>, positioned above the back of the head emanating from an illuminated active Bindu- a realized self. It moves apart and then again brought closer and taken down. This whole process shown by a single dancer, invokes the male and the female within her, with her right and left hands respectively, the sides, which are used to depict a man and a woman in dance. An elaborate depiction of this whole process follows where Chandralekha locates the living body as the focus of experiencing the self by exploring 'eroticism in the body, ascetism in the body' (Chandralekha,1994). This has been attempted to be shown through 'conceptual' and 'corporeal' means in Sharira as she says in her prologue to Sharira in her typical staccato poetic style: "Body corporeal and Body conceptual. Body as a transformative field... Body, as a path towards a return to vast inner spaces of hidden resources." (2001a)

Following this, the hastas illustrate the image of the dawn breaking on the horizon through semicircular move across from *mukula* to *alapadma*. As the sun crosses the horizon, it is being looked at through the *Galini* mudra<sup>34</sup> formed by both the hands held at the face with head and torso turning left, right, centre and upward, an act that acknowledges and invokes the powers of the ultimate source of energy. The act of seeing the sunrise was also personal with Chandralekha as she mentions how, after a year of travelling abroad in the 1970's, it felt important to get attuned again. And watching the sunrise everyday was, for her, a beautiful way of reclaiming herself and getting back to her tuning (Lakshmi 2003:122). The hands, after being released from the Galini mudra, come to kartarimukha hasta at both the sides of the eyes to show movement of the eyeballs towards right and left. This is continued with an up-down move as well with suchi hasta at both the

ends of the eyes. The eyes ‘flutter like the flame of a lamp’, which, as Chatterjea (2004,302) says, ‘heralds the arousal of the goddess spirit’. The terms ‘Goddess spirit’, or her ‘arousal’ are quite questionable as they do not fit in with terms like ‘feminine force’, ‘female energy’, ‘transcendent femininity’ that Chandralekha has dealt with that are unequivocally in human terms. The action in itself comprising the fluttering eyes which represent the *chanchala* –unsteady nature of the mind is contained by an understanding of the underlying fact encompassing concepts of the human psyche and physique. In Chandralekha’s (2001b) words, a built-in consciousness of the ‘unity as against compartmentalization of Sex, Sense, Spirit- Sexuality, Sensuality, Spirituality- to see their togetherness in our bodies’ enmeshed within each living individual adds to such an understanding. Chandralekha then visualizes the three ‘S’s as a three pronged vajra trident over the two eyes and the forehead where the third eye is located. In this too, I see that it has much more to it than just being her ‘salutation’ to the third eye as the ‘centre of nervous and spiritual energy’ as what Chatterjea interprets it as. It is rather symbolic of the three ‘S’s that Chandralekha professes to be co-existing in the body and the realization of that fact that is metaphoric of the significance of the third eye, the opening of which is said to symbolize self realization. This understanding is brought out at a conceptual level in the following sections

Now, the left and right hands combine to form matsya hasta which point and plunge downwards from the chest level. Chatterjea refers to the matsya mudra as a ‘traditional symbol of female sexuality’ (2004. 302). When examined in the context of yoga and tantra on which Sharira is based, this understanding of Chatterjea too necessitates a reinterpretation. Shah (1987, 23) shows how in Tantra, Matsya symbolically represents mind and prana, the vital force. She says, ‘As fish floats in the water, mind also floats in the



**Fig: 16**

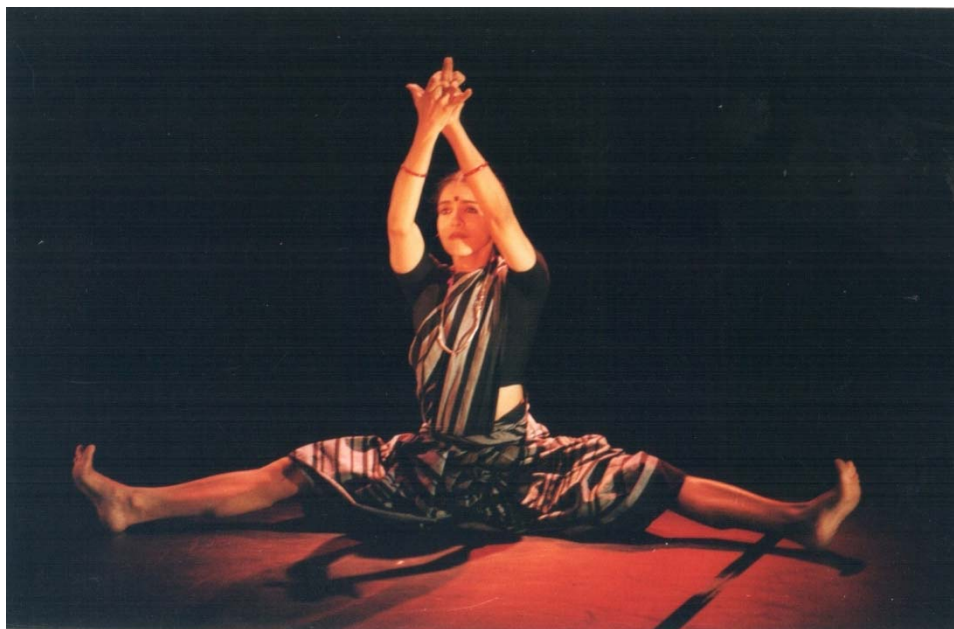


**Fig: 17**

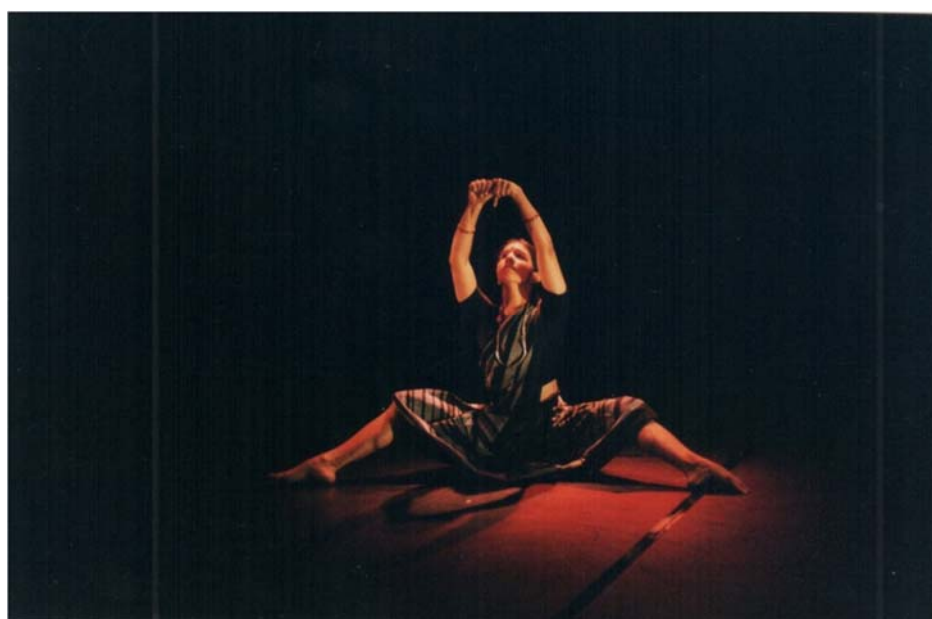
sea of sense objects'. Similarly, Prana, that pervades the entire body, 'moves like a fish in the ida and pingala'<sup>35</sup>. Chandralekha shows how it is thus the manifest senses that are invigorated by the prana vayu which enable the flow

of the 'sensuality' in the subtle body and that is symbolised by the Matsya hasta.

Following this, Chandralekha delineates and comments on 'sexuality' within the living body using concepts from tantra. Shah, (1987, 18-19) discussing about the symbology of Ardhanarisvara in Tantra says it "represents the synthesized form of linga-yoni or Siva-Sakti through the symbol of Ardhanarisvara or half male- half female form....These pairs of opposites are nothing but forms of energy. Every male has female pole and every female has male pole, in latent form... the right side always represents male-sun or positive pole while the left side represents female moon or negative pole". In Sharira, Chandralekha did not delve with the interpretations of differentiations of Male-Female into positive-negative, sun-moon or shiva-shakti. What mattered were the feminine and masculine forms of energy in each individual, and the primacy of the feminine. Mookerjee (1965,57) sees that 'full emancipation is dependent upon our realization of this fact'. The fact which, he says, 'indicates that the male and female elements are balanced' in the half male and half female composite figure of Siva and Parvati. As in the first section, where the shikara and pathaka representing the male and female energies unite to ignite the subtle forces within the body, a new understanding of the interstices between male and female is elaborated here<sup>36</sup>. The left, as always in dance, is shown to signify the female portion through pralamba and the male, the right portion, through shikara (Fig-17). These are brought close and extended at chest level. The left pathaka (yoni) is gradually turned to shikara (linga) and the right turned from shikara to pathaka. This is unlike the first section wherein they became united as a samyukta linga-yoni. The male of the right shikara is categorically shown to recognize the feminine or female energies in oneself



**Fig-18**



**Fig-19**



**Fig-20**



**Fig-21**



shown through pathaka. So does the female of left pathaka recognize the male energies in oneself thereby shown through shikara. As a mutual recognition and balancing of the maleness and femaleness in each entity- man or woman, is achieved in conceptual terms, the dance now proceeds to establish an invoking and exalting of the 'hidden resources' and 'invisible energies' within the living body. The words in the programme note for Sloka say: 'Sloka carries forward Chandralekha's explorations of luminal, fluid, shifting sexuality in the bodies of men and women from her previous work Raga, while intensifying the enigma of in-betweenness in our bodies' (2003,39). The above section is reflective of the fact that this process is taken further ahead in Sharira.

The usage and positioning of two mudras gain significance in the following section. They are the mushti-mudra<sup>37</sup> raised above the head and a type of yoni mudra<sup>38</sup> at the lower pelvic area. The mushti-mudra, 'affirming the earth-goddess (prithvi)', proceeds with a protruded right mid-finger (Fig-18) to travel down towards the floor (Fig-19) as the dancer lies supine on the her back in Baddakonasana<sup>39</sup>. As she raises herself to regain the split, it is changed to yoni mudra. This action is seemingly suggestive of the earthy male and female energies invoked during the union of the male and female<sup>40</sup>. Fingers of the yoni mudra are in constant movement – aroused, vibrating, 'pulsating' with energy. It is moved up and along from below towards the face as if to show the activation of all the subtle energy centers along the line which partakes in the elixir of the aroused creative energies (Fig-20,21). It is finally rested at the yoni<sup>41</sup>. Geeta Doctor (2001) shares an incident where Chandralekha 'gestures towards her pelvic area, making a triangle with her hands and describes the yoni as the seat of sexuality, spirituality and physicality, throbbing with the unseen energy of the universe itself'. Typical of the unseen energies Chandralekha says, 'Sharira takes us on a journey towards the more abstract forms of worship, of the spasms of birth...' It

depicts the ‘secrets of creation, the secrets of life in a woman’s body’<sup>42</sup>. Likewise, the knees are opened, closed and opened again to accommodate a typical pushpaputa on the Yoni. The fecundity principle that is held by the hands in pushpaputa is symbolic of the power of creation attributed to the female. Tattva yoga mudra<sup>43</sup>, is extended over the head in the same Bhaddakonasana, that indicates a regulation and balancing of all the panchabhutas in the human body.

Bhaddakonasana, which Chandralekha regarded as a ‘pre-natal position as advised and described in Patanjali’s Yogasutram’, had been worked out earlier in *Sri, Yantra and Mahakaal*<sup>44</sup>. In Sri, it was done with a lone male and three female dancers where all three female dancers lay supine with opened legs and the male dancer stood erect. Chandralekha considered the image to be ‘the positive aspect of male female union leading to birth, breath and life’<sup>45</sup>. A similar concept is employed here, in the first part of Sharira, as energies pertaining to birth are being invoked within the subtle body but, it is not depicted or personalized by dancers the way it was done in Sri and Mahakaal.

The next phase of Sharira is where Chandralekha is seen to explore ‘spirituality’ within the living body. Tattva yoga mudra brings the emphasis on the sensory powers that are engaged here in an act of withdrawal and revitalization. One by one all the sense organs located on the face are closed with Shanmukhi or Yoni mudra (Fig-22). This reflects a stage of Pratyahara in yoga practice as it cuts off all external stimuli coming from the six openings and mind is withdrawn from association with sense objects. Chandralekha depicts here, the two pathways of awakening potent spirituality in the body –one, through detachment as depicted through pratyahara, that is referred by her as ‘asceticism in the body’ and another by

recognizing the ‘ascending feminine force’ realised through Kundalini Yoga where sometimes the concept of ‘eroticism in the body’ is also used. She says in her prologue to Yantra (1994): “Energy curled and coiled- language- a vocabulary of inwardness. It has to do with Soundarya- Ananda, luminosity in the body, awareness, great joy how to invoke these, it has to do with the most intimate spaces in the body. It has to do with eroticism in the body, asceticism in the body”. Writing on the types of yoga, Woodroffe (1951, 688) clarifies that ‘The first class of yoga (referring to Dhyana or Bhavana Yoga) is that in which ecstasy (Samadhi) is attained by intellectual processes (Kriya-jnana) of meditation and the like, with the aid, it may be of auxiliary processes of Mantra or Hatha Yoga (other than rousing of Kundalini Shakthi) and by detachment from the world; the second (referred as Kundalini Yoga) stands apart as that portion of Hatha Yoga in which, though intellectual processes are not neglected, the creative and sustaining Shakti of the whole body is actually and truly united with the Lord Consciousness”.

This may be easily aligned with idea of exploring ‘ascetism in the body’ as referred to by Chandralekha in Yantra. But here, the closure of ears, eyes, nostrils and mouth, followed by stretching to extend them and finally releasing it to its normal condition brings in a sense of relooking the power potential of the sensory organs, thereby helping the body to rediscover and fine-tune its sensibilities. Chandralekha valued sensuality as an important sustaining force for femininity. For her, giving up on one's sensuality even for the sake of gender equality in a patriarchal male world was unthinkable<sup>46</sup>. Femininity and sensuality played major roles in the concepts that she worked with advocating the ‘primacy of woman’, ‘men exploring their femininity’ and ‘undifferentiated’ or ‘undivided self who can bring a beauty of male/female in themselves<sup>47</sup> who wiped out the difference’ between gender and were, according to her, the ultimate. The depiction of shanmukhi mudra here, in

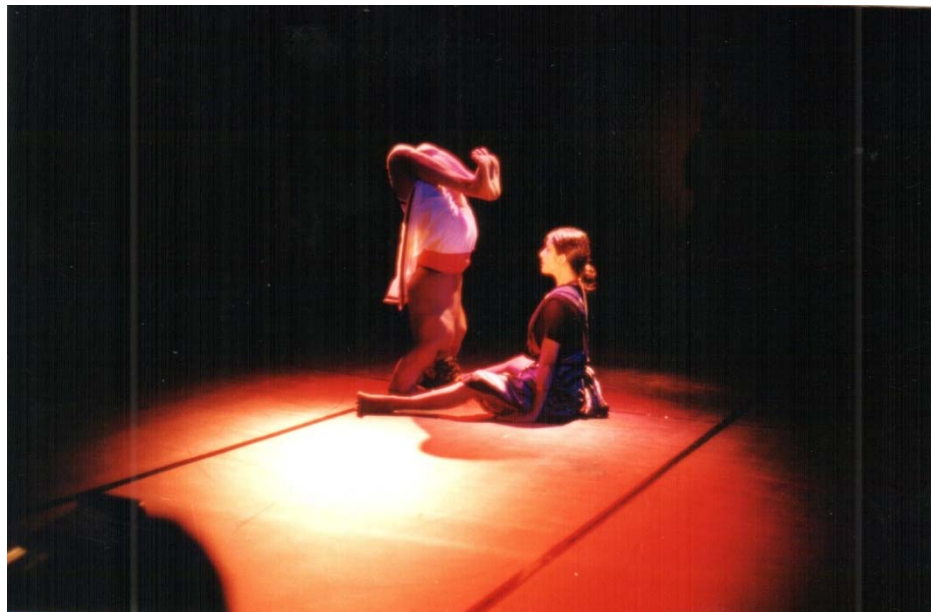
consequence, will not mean blocking of senses but rather sharpening of the senses. The released shanmukhi mudra plays in and out in front of the face as if to highlight the gaps and grey areas between external perceptions and its internalization.

Images of raised shikara hands, both left and right, of female and male energies rise- steady and powerful, which gradually move together in to different bandhas (hands interlocked at wrists) downwards as mushti bandha, kapithha bandha, intertwining alapadmas and finally to kilaka –the conjoining at the lower pelvis- all of which use samyukta hastas. Finally, kurma hands are brought up along the central line of the torso which then go down. It conveys how Kurma hasta, symbolic of Mooladhara and where kundalini is said to be coiled as a serpent, becomes activated to send the ‘ascending feminine force’ spiralling up the energy circuits. Having realized the steady flow of energies-sensual, sexual and spiritual, within the body, it seems to be now ready to channelize the steady energy laden potential imagined as an Aakarshana dhanurasana<sup>48</sup> ready to be launched anytime. Visually being metaphoric of a taut bow, it is also to be understood that by performance of this asana, ‘the nadis are purified and hands and legs are energized’ (Reddy, 1992:20).

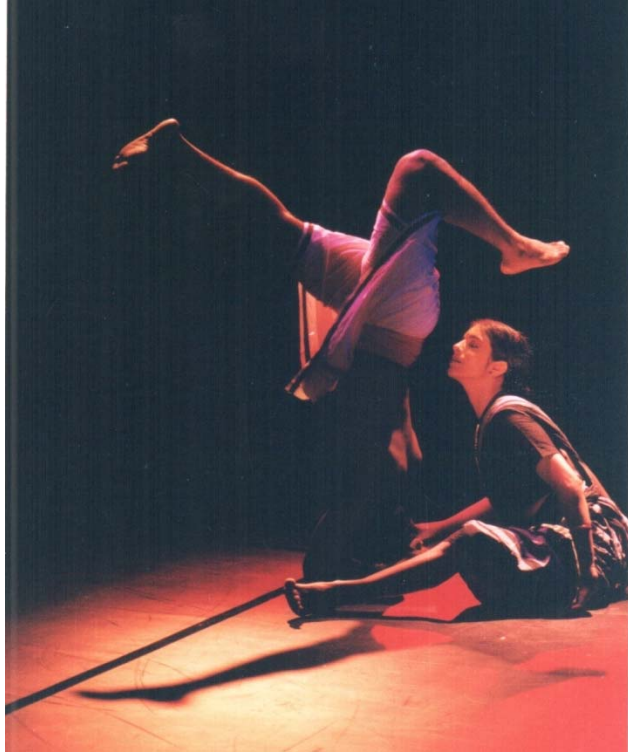
The following section is where ‘body corporeal’ takes over. One more dancer, a male, is introduced and the activities that progress are more on the physical plane than on the psychical. His introduction to the scene is rather



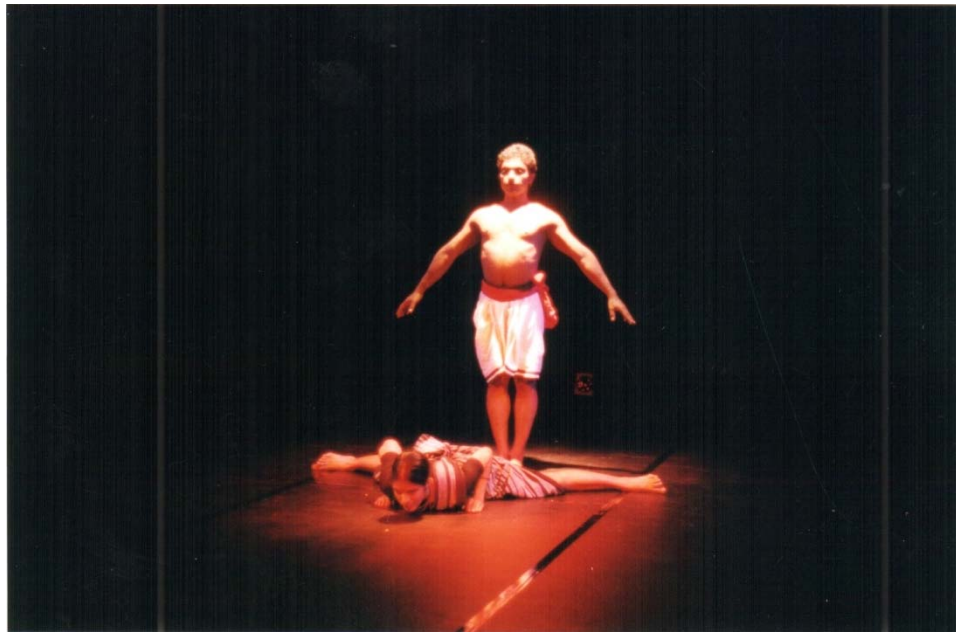
**Fig-22**



**Fig-23**



**Fig-24**



**Fig-25**

inconspicuous as he lands from an unknown space to kneel and bend before a body which has just realized its full energy potential. His identity is not fixed as he is represented at different times as- the male symbol, man being born from the woman, a devotee who worships the feminine principle and as a man who explores his own femininity – one who is always shown in relativity to the female or the feminine. He gradually raises his legs from an upturned position (shirshana). The legs are kept moving until he reverts back to being prone (Fig-23,24). The female dancer is all the while seated with legs opened up and bent knees with her heels and hands resting on the floor. The tension in the space between them creates what Venkataraman (2001) calls a ‘crackling erotic charge between the two dancers, even without any actual physical contact’. And the dancer seems to relish the coherence of such a charge as she arches back feeling soaked in the sensuality of the experience. There is not once any sign of cowing or bowing before each other as their individual spines tend to maintain their physicality and their line and both the dancers are active participants in the act.

Later, both the dancers move to a prone position with the male towing behind the female. The female dancer mostly lies flat on her chest with legs straight and extended to the sides and occasionally lifting her pelvis or head. The man’s face seen for the first time since his entrance as the female dancer lifts up his face between the heels of her open feet , is his introduction per se, which seems to voice Chandralekha’s famous comment on women as the ‘producer of men’<sup>49</sup>. He eventually kicks up his legs in the air and comes to standing position (Fig-25) behind the female dancer with legs intertwined in Garudasana as a body awakened to a regenerated vitality. The crouched positions seem to derive from Chandralekha’s understanding of the rich iconography of female deities, especially the Indus valley female goddess one of whom she refers to as seen ‘crouched, with legs spread, with open yoni, as

she gives birth to the gods and the quarters of the sky'(1992). Birthing acquires importance as a process that gives primacy to women according to Chandralekha. She says, 'Woman is prime to creation and not equal. She is central. She is the only one who has the power to create. And by that I don't mean procreation. I mean the tremendous creative energy within her body itself. She has the capacity to give birth to creation, to vegetation, to everything'<sup>50</sup>.

Following this, the dancers mirror each other's moves as if mutually reciprocating and sharing the space between each other. Mirrored images become an important part when Chandralekha reworked Sharira with Tishani Joshi and Shaji John. It speaks a language which is in contrast to the first scene between the dancers where, as we had seen, a level of tension is built up, that at the same time accommodates two different personas exhibited with one dancer seated and the other dancer upside down, one with legs rested on the floor and the other with legs splaying in the air and with their eyes not meeting at all. Both of them had acted out their individualities personified. This was one of Chandralekha's ways of conveying the element of sexuality, as she remarks, by 'bringing out the primal energy between a man and a woman'<sup>51</sup>. But here, in this section, the space is of recognizance and understanding where the similarities and differences merge to create a congenial atmosphere for both to sustain and radiate their energies. Bonding is developed through moments of tenderness where they look eye to eye and perform the same moves, sometimes joined at their temples, and at other times, with arms around and necks turned and locked-in to look like one closing upon the other. An 'in-betweeness' and 'undifferentiation' develops as they share their space and respond to each other to see their differences dissolve in the process of such a bonding. For Chandralekha, the flow of femininity occurs when the body speaks 'of curvature, of tenderness, of

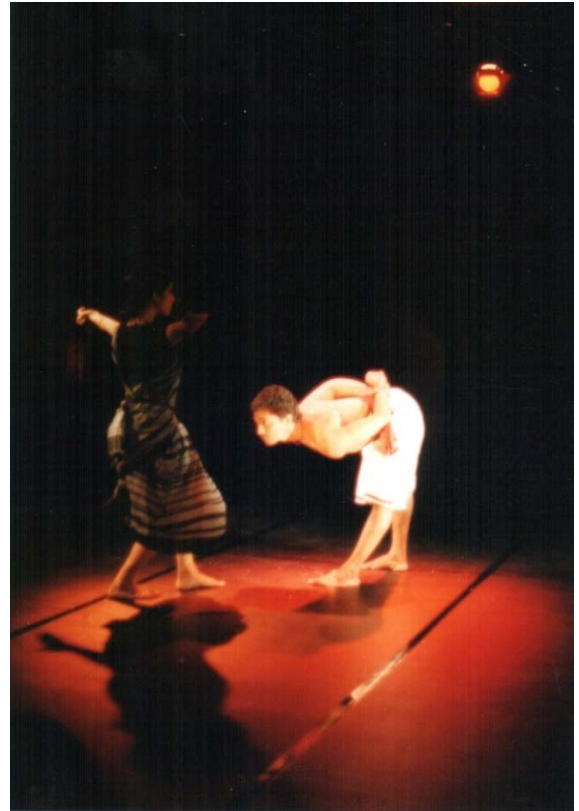


sensuality, evident in a look, a touch or a moment of tension; a language that could be held back or released in a flow'<sup>52</sup>. The next section deals with the feminine form being deified. The female dancer presents herself as the feminine form that is deified and the male dancer takes the role of the subject or individual who is either male or female. The form is the object to be revered and the individual represents the subjective entity who constructs the image to be venerated. The object is constant as it is its essentialities and energies that have to permeate amongst the individuals. To the first beats of the *Pakhawaj* and a raising crescendo, the man raises the arms of the woman (Fig-26). Her arms are outstretched and legs are also placed at different angles to balance the positioning of the arms. Chandrlekha's comment on the agency of human hand in constructing the divine is clear when the man raises the arms of the apparently immobile form. He so constructs and structures the deity to reflect in it a symbolism and culmination of his aspirations that are deeply associated with principles governing human life and its creation. Chandrlekha cleverly brings in a resemblance of Kali standing on the prostrate form of Shiva where the feminine form in all its power is worshipped. It also revives 'the images of the great mother who rose as if from the earth, with arms outstretched in a primal gesture of affirmation' (Chandrlekha. 1992).

Following this, the man bows in reverence and performs acts of invoking the powers of the feminine (Fig-27). He positions *matsya hasta* against the level of her chest and moves in and out of the stage (Fig-28). According to Woodroffe (1951.684), the chakras are centres of Shakti as vital force. In other words, they are centres of Pranashakti manifested by Pranavayu in the living body'. As we had seen in an earlier section, the use of *matsya hands*



**Fig-26**



**Fig-27**



**Fig-28**

depicts how the sensory perceptions are invigorated by the *prana vayu* which enable the flow of the 'sensuality' in the subtle body<sup>53</sup>. The man appears to show his gratitude and reverence and at the same time tries to invoke in himself the power of the vital life force. He performs an elaborate sequence of *Kalari* movements. The sequence known as the *Kaikuttipayattu*<sup>54</sup> or *Pillathangi* in *Kalarippayattu* parlance is directed at or performed towards the female dancer as an act of reverence and gratitude. The female dancer starts to move now as if awakened from a deep reverie as the man continues in his exhilarated dance accompanied to a rousing rendition of "*Shankara girijavani paarvati patesha Jatami Ganga trilocana trishuladhara.... mahamaya maheshwara*". A change in her stance is concomitant with the analogy that Chandralekha tries to find in the awakening of a sleeping *kundalini* in the individual. The individual, as if to feel the catalytic effect of the energy or as a note of acknowledging the feminine within one's self, encircles her with his arms, pauses to take in the experience and then turns back to continuing his dance. It is about now that both of them start dancing together again with angular moves where each of them matches the other's move and continue doing so as lights start to fade out signaling the end. As they mirror their moves to build confident selves amongst themselves - 'indivisible' and 'undifferentiated', it endorses the presence of energizing principle of *prakriti* within each one of them- each one of us.

'Sharira' performed by Padmini Chettur, during its initial performances had been different from that choreographed with Tishani Doshi. The later work<sup>55</sup> reflected some characteristic changes brought by Chandralekha with regard to the changing context and her own ideas on the subject. The initial scene, focused on a posture alike *Danurasana*, is held with bent legs where its uplifted feet are held in tandem by the elbows which support the toes. The

palms are held with widely opened out fingers. The dancer makes an easy manoeuvre across the floor to face the stage front and rises up again in the same pose to a rendition of “*jagata janani... jwalamukhi*”. This is not just any Janus faced graphical interlude. By a 180 degree turn that enables a featuring of the double-ender, Chandralekha means to show an all permeating *tejas*, its omnipotence and a personification of fire/ desire<sup>56</sup>. She is like a peacock that unfurls its plumage and turns back and forth giving signals of its potent virility. From what Chandralekha personifies in her, she can be seen as an honest body empowered enough to display its vitality, a potent energy source and a radiating centre- emanating from it the soundaryalahari <sup>57</sup>(the waves of beauty). I see this image as an embodiment of ‘soundarya’- where the quintessence of sensual, sexual and spiritual forces coexist and thrive, the power of which radiates forth. Here, the illumination is not concentrated and made visible from one point behind the head as performed earlier but, permeates the entire body and appears to reach out to the audience.

The extended split with esoteric rejoinders in the form of yoga mudras and tantra mudras have been done away with as a measure towards a renewed exploration of body language, of exploiting expression through body movements and lessening the exoticism of the subject. There is no usage of symbolic mudras to depict male or female, nor is there a different costuming for each. Saree does not anymore limit the moves made by the woman as both the man and the woman wear hand tied pyjamas extending till the knees. Dance does not fall in to becoming at time essentially feminine with movements of curvature, tenderness, and fluidity or essentially masculine through angular moves. They tend to become an admixture of both angular and soft meanderings. The thrust being on one to one interaction and

mirrored moves, the path towards search for oneness of the three 'S's of Chandralekha dropped its prominent reliance on hastamudras. In short, the 'Body conceptual' of the earlier version of Sharira had become more of a 'Body corporeal' in its new avatar. But, the exalted abode of fire/desire still remained a woman, determinedly the 'primacy of woman'. It is also interesting to see how Chandralekha intends a sartorial pun when she devises a Yoni mudra from two Shikara hastas. Shikara, representative of the male phallus as depicted in dance, is conspicuously turned into a yoni (Shanmukhi mudra) for purposes of meditation and renewing of sensory capabilities, in a sense either challenging to obfuscate the patriarchal primacy or by recognition of the constituent male- femaleness in every individual.

In another scene, the man's face is lifted between her palms and not feet- an endearing introduction for the individual. Thus raised, the man comes to Shirsasana. The identity of the man, with regard to his position, his leg at times coalescing and at other times splaying around, imitating fetal positions and are never held erect, are a reflection of his ever changing identity. He explores his space around as he explores his self. So is the woman's as she joins in Shirsasana to explore and share space, in their combined search for shared identity and 'undifferentiated' self.

The woman comes to a split and the man at her back appears to be in a vertical split with arms and one of the legs on the floor and the other extended high above. These images are visually evocative of the inverted figure of male in ♂ and the female in ♀, who is though, seated. The final image takes an acrobatic tone with one standing on the legs and another on

the hands and each of them supporting one another during their twists and turns. As they try balancing, they repose faith in each other to keep from falling and that defines their existence as a pair- both enlivening and balancing the masculine and feminine in them, in their existence as a joined pair-the 'undifferentiated'. As it starts, so it ends showing the two sides to a same coin as they still hold on to each other essentially entwined, very much like the DNA helix<sup>58</sup>.

### **4.3. Exploring Body – Towards finding its dance**

“Bharatanatyam is moving away from me” she had said<sup>59</sup>. Sharira, her last work did not have any significant Bharatanatyam movement except for the mandala positions. Abhinaya had left her long ago; now nritya too departed and the body began to find its own movement to sway to its own rhythm. Various forms of bodily expressions were colors in her palette as they helped her paint a visual picture with dance. It became a language that enabled the body to comment where the body, as master of itself with its portrayal in history, that supported this view and her negotiations on her transplanted soil, is what mattered. She used varied principles of matter or thought that were explored by the physical forms and vice versa. Thus, for Chandralekha, Bharatanatyam remained a language of the body, addressing bodies without any qualifiers, where body remains a supreme syncretic of languages that offers importance to itself, its physicality.

But where and why did Bharatanatyam disappear along the journey. For Chandralekha who gave much importance to the form why did she say “Bharatanatyam is moving away from me” or why was Bharatanatyam rather absent from her later works? Did she cling on to it for more than long?

Or did she find a new language to convey her concepts? Though one of her early statements suggest otherwise, another made by her reflects a time when this shift started taking shape. She says:

“Dance was always an exhilarating experience for me. I love the Bharatanatyam form. I can never have enough of it. There is so much energy in it. One can go on refining the geometry further and further like an abstract painting. The power of the line is there. ‘Rekha daurbalyam’, weakness of line is what I cannot stand.”(Venkataraman,1993).

Talking about choreographing Yantra (1994), she says, “As I began to respond to the language of inwardness, I also started thinking not in terms of the detailed classification of the human physiognomy- the ‘*angas*’ and ‘*upangas*’—in the Bharata Natyam *shastras*, but in terms of an integrated zone of the body comprising hundreds of energy points with the potential for vitalization” (1994).

About the first statement, as Rukmini Devi had consciously worked towards creating ‘accurate’ movements of the limbs in the performance of Bharatanatyam adavus<sup>60</sup> and as Kalakshetra or the style had become a constant source of dancers in Chandralekha’s works, had the stress on accurateness or refinement of the lines in Bharatanatyam gone way too far? Though it can be seen from Balasaraswati’s or her student’s old photos that there was a set pattern or structure on the placement of the limbs, neither did they seem to emphasize upon the symmetry of movements to ‘refining the geometry’ nor did stretching of the lines of arms and legs mean perfection in execution. Their extensions across the stage as an end in itself was actually discouraged<sup>61</sup> and it was ironical that Chandralekha too had learnt Bharatanatyam from Guru Ellappa pillai who had taught Balasaraswati. I explore this question here not in the context of Chandralekha’s choreographic skills in using Bharatanatyam but on the shifts in the prominence of the

dance form in her works. As per the second quote here, where she talks about discovering or developing a language of inwardness, in Yantra, she had tried to show the geometric power potential of the body. She worked at concepts that she felt relates the body and its dimensions to the spatial trajectories. These were brought out as choreography by superimposing what she felt were the square, circle and triangle of body with that of the angular moves and extending these through similar patterns created by body across the stage. In Chandralekha's later works where she gives importance to 'increasing the emotional potential of the body' Bharatanatyam movements per se, apart from marginally serving this need, only added to the aesthetic meaning by acting as interjections to the flow of concepts and to exploration of interstices between Kalaripayattu and Yoga. For Chandralekha, Bharatanatyam was just a language of the body which, till a certain time, sustained the portrayal of her themes. It was one of the languages that could translate her thoughts better. Two main reasons why it 'moved away' from Chandralekha's work can be pointed to the deviations visible with respect to *kalapramana* and themes of her productions. Bharatanatyam that is usually performed with shifts between *madhyama kala*, *drutakala* and uses sparingly the *vilambit kala* could not respond to the *ativilambit kala* of her later creations. Her themes, which largely explored the interpersonal areas and dealt with subtle energies, became meditative. Here, the emotional expression of the body responded to body's rhythm and bodily expressions were emoted in its own way that began to jump the borders of form/ style. In short, Chandralekha's dance became entwined with body but, when concepts needed deeper spaces, it left out what it clung to- the established language of dance.

As Chandralekha's themes dealt specifically with the condition of female, with all the strength derived from Angika, Prana, where usage of strength



gained from understanding of body principles, was focused to start a dialogue to explore the Body-female body. Also commented upon were the male body where femaleness or femininity was explored. Immenseness of the empowered female body is the characteristic difference visible from *Sri* woman to *Sloka* woman where it meant an understanding of undifferentiated body, its journey from femininity to realizing equanimity of both male and female amongst every being.

Indian patriarchal mindset was her greatest enemy. She ushered in all her resources to destabilize this in her works. Her terms of establishing the primacy of woman had nothing to be relative to male- only patriarchal notions which was uttered with an 'I exist inspite of you' mentality that she held with patriarchy or patriarchal establishments that looked at dancers or women at different times in history as either to be showcased with glitter and glamour on international stages as commodity meant for export or, as an indulgence to satisfy their sexual needs with very little freedom in matters of choice or chance of mutual space of respect in society. The latter justified the former in terms of undermining woman's potential in the social realm that ensued discrimination in education and work status, areas of employment, and the largest division of all between the private and the public domain for which religion, culture and tradition were used as greatest endorsers.

Questioning the dancer in her local loyal-andric cliché (continued dalliance with maintaining loyalty towards patriarchal setups) and interrogating the dance taken over by the 'respectable' cultural custodians who removed it far from reality, the dancing body, for Chandralekha, had to be weighed against being bogged by dominant controls. She articulated the necessity to go back to the time when body had control over itself, where body and nature reigned supreme and not religion propounded to effect subordination of woman. She

stressed on the 'primacy' of woman. She said, "I want primacy not equality. Woman is prime to creation and not equal" (Lakshmi, 2003). Her concepts drew power from *Shakta tantra* where Shakti is held as the supreme controller of the Universe and 'woman is recognized as the Supreme Master, as the channel of cosmic energy'.<sup>62</sup> Though it did not fall within the confines of ritualistic way of seeing woman or femininity as the pathway to realize self as is practiced or believed in Tantra, she seemed to subvert the misogynist in tantra by not restricting feminine to symbolic pathway<sup>63</sup> alone but to find a balance in every one. Paradoxically, the 'search' for the male lord in classical Bharatanatyam became the search for the femaleness in oneself, to seek, as Chandralekha states 'beauty of male/female' in oneself. Chandralekha contextualized this feature in dance by purporting the search for the feminine within every self to empower oneself. Male-femaleness in oneself emphasized principles of accommodativeness- mutual respect-understanding-subsuming of ego- eradication of power play and false consciousness.

Some concepts that showed an exchanged or altered role play of sexes as in Mahakaal and Raga subvert and at the same time project the irony in the notions of gender in myths and in the mainstream thought process and dealt with what ensued from such a supposition. Chandralekha presented Nataraja, in her work Mahakaal (1995), depicted through a female dancer where the focus was on annihilating false consciousness and not about showing his attributes (no glance directed towards hands) or narrative mythology associated with Shiva's dance. She says how she found that "there was exciting diversity and variation in the casting of the little crawling figure below Shiva's foot. It is to control and regulate this dwarf-demon, Apasmara, symbolizing egotism ignorance and sullen arrogance that Nataraja dances". She adds that "it also enabled a direct addressing of contemporary issues of

false consciousness”<sup>64</sup>. The sequence, which had a female dancer moving in and out of the upraised leg position and depicting Shiva’s different attributes through changing hand gestures with many dancers rolling, twisting and turning beneath her, was visualized and performed thus to set its meaning at a different time and place. The concept of the dancing Shiva was represented here involving the act of balancing and at the same time crushing false consciousnesses of the world under the female dancer’s feet where woman/female figure became the new Nataraja tackling the bodies of false consciousness growing all over.

She teased/ provoked the audience as in *Raga* (1998) where the idiosyncrasies of a conditioned psyche were teased out to create in every viewer titillation or revulsion. Her way of tackling gender equations in society were different. Man-woman duet was easier and an accepted norm. The politically correct innuendo of man making love to a woman on the bollywood screen became here, a man-man equation in exploring love on a choreographic level<sup>65</sup>. Chandralekha’s thwarting the notions of masculinity was meant to provoke the patriarchal mind, straining its power hold over woman’s body, subverting the idea that man need not be caressed and be the ‘lover’ and ‘beloved’ at the same time.

Similarly, in the case of *Mahakaal* too, a sequence progresses where two men armed with a sword and shield enact fight sequence around two seated woman to the singing of ‘Priye charusheel’ as one caresses the foot of the other, takes it to her above her forehead. The act, allegorical to that of Krishna, who says in this ashtapadi that it requires Radha’s feet to be placed on his head for his burning passions to calm down, did not require a dressing

down by the Radhas or their appeasement by the Krishnas, where the same significance may have rested unequivocally sans concerns reflecting their gender. But in Mahakaal when masochistic clashes ensued all around, femininity performed between two women, sans its incursions on gender roles, through gestures of affection and love is shown to withstand the test of war time. Either way, she questioned the status quo of the man caressing a woman- man as the maker and woman the receiver of love.

Chandralekha's works from *Devadasi* (1961) and *Navagraha* (1972) to *Sharira* (2001), based on Indian traditional concepts were made relevant to our present times. "Where does the body begin... and where does it end?" remained a perennial question for her. This quest continued both in her art and life. The importance of esoteric Indian concepts like *mandala*, *yantra*, *navagraha*, *kaala*, *Ardhanarishwara*, etc. were explored with a contemporary mind and contextualized with a modern sensibility. From creative imagery visualized through the playful riddles of Bhaskaracharya's *Lilavati* (1989), commonness of yoga and dance in *Prana* (1990), accentuated power of women in *Sri* (1991), Body- abstract- in *Yantra* (1994), time and timelessness in *Mahakal* (1995), hidden femininity explored in *Raga* (1998), self and renewal in *Sloka* (1999), and body ascending in *Sharira* (2001), Chandralekha's choreographies flow from one into the other, the recurrent motifs reminding us of the cyclical notions of time imagined as a *Kaalasarpa* (primordial serpent).

Her works have reflected her search for a unifying force in our lives, to replenish and present the body as an unending resource for energizing the micro and macrocosmic universe. This has been a force that was worked to

sustain the energy and vitality of human body, unleash its ultimate potential and adapt to changing times. Chandralekha does not leave behind institutions, Shishyas, a hallowed legacy or a repertoire to be done over and over again.

She leaves behind questions for us to raise

Questions...to search for Openness.

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<sup>1</sup> Translation mine.

<sup>2</sup> It was when Chandralekha along with Sadanand Menon was charged with sedition for anti-governmental activities during the Emergency days. She has discussed how it she recovered from that incident with the help of dance in Bharucha (1995), McCarty (1992), Lakshmi (2003).

<sup>3</sup> The renaming of Sadir as Bharatanatyam, the acceptance of temple stage aesthetics brought in by Rukmini Devi that also include changes to costume and style of musical rendition, development of linear history of the form by linking it to Bharata's Natya Sastra are some of the parts of the invented history that I consider as myths invented.

<sup>4</sup> Chandralekha had an incessant charm for Bandhani clothes and silver jewellery of Gujarat, her birthplace. There are many photos of her wearing these- Special is the one on her last trip with her troupe to perform Sharira at the Frankfurt Bookfair, (2006).

<sup>5</sup> Qtd from Interview with Chandralekha, C.S.Lakshmi.2003, p133.

<sup>6</sup> Rainer's 'No Manifesto' (1965) is said to have been a strategy formulated to demystify dance.

<sup>7</sup> Request Concert was an adaptation and interpretation of a monologue written in German by Franz Xavier Kroetz performed solo by Chandralekha.

<sup>8</sup> Programme notes of Prana. 1980.

<sup>9</sup> *Navagrahas* refer to the nine celestial bodies in cosmos which according to Indian astrology are said to influence life of people on earth. They are Ravi (Sun), Chandra (Moon), Kuja (Mars), Budha (Mercury), Guru (Jupiter), Sukra (Venus), Sani (Saturn), Rahu and Ketu.

<sup>10</sup> In interview with Gopalakrishnan, K.K.2003.

<sup>11</sup> In interview with Sai Prashanti. 1985. qtd in Bharucha, Rustom. 1995. p- 86

<sup>12</sup> In this series begun in 1949, Albers explored chromatic interactions with flat colored squares arranged concentrically on the canvas.

<sup>13</sup> Chandralekha's poster on time based on the *Navagraha* concept was printed as calendar by Air India.

<sup>14</sup> Chandralekha mentions about the places she visited during this trip in her interview with C.S. Lakshmi. 2003. p116-122.

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<sup>15</sup> In interview with Gopalakrishnan, K.K.. 2003.

<sup>16</sup> Chandralekha. Introduction to Prana, 1990 .

<sup>17</sup> Nadis are pathways of flow of subtle energy connecting different charkas or psychic centers of the human body.

<sup>18</sup> The analysis undertaken here is from a video recording of the performance of Prana premiered at NCPA Tata theatre, Oct 8, 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Personal communication with Padmini Chettur, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006

<sup>20</sup> Personal communication with Padmini Chettur, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2006

<sup>21</sup> Poothara is a seven stepped raised podium located at the south-west corner of the kalari. It has an image of Kalari Paradevata or Kalari deity. There are also Ganapathi thara and guru peetam which are installed near the Poothara that have images of different deities and gurus. It must be noted that these are not idols of deities but a Sankalpam, or a symbolic image representing the deity. Poothara vandanam is an act of praying or supplication at the Poothara.

<sup>22</sup> Meipayattu comprises of exercises and sequences for the toning of body.

<sup>23</sup> *Mei payattu* are exercises done to tone and train the body before attempting elaborate phrases of the fight sequences. *Angapayattu*, are the sequences on the *angam* or the field/place of fight.

<sup>24</sup> Personal communication with Chandralekha. 13.02.2006

<sup>25</sup> Sharira performed on 19.03.2001 has been taken for analysis here.

<sup>26</sup> In yogic practice of meditation, bindu is envisioned as Neela Bindu associated with the aspirant's supreme causal body.

<sup>27</sup> Chakravaka asana is done with the body bent with both palms and knees touching the floor and head bent. As the head is raised up, so is one of the legs that is lifted up with slight bent on its knee.

<sup>28</sup> Chakravaka was depicted as one of the water birds in Leelavati (1989) and in Mahakal (1995), a group of Chakravaka birds were depicted to symbolize the day-night periodicity of time. The same motif has been used by other dancers too. For instance, Uttara Asha Coorlawala had used it much before Chandralekha, in her 1983's 'Asana' and Manjusri Chaki-Sircar in her 'The Vanishing Mallards' of 1994.

<sup>29</sup> This is my view expressed in an article on Chandralekha. (Puthenedam.2007)

<sup>30</sup> As stated and reflected in interviews. Basak, Jhuma 1997, C.S. Lakshmi 2001, 126 and Interview : Nature and numbers meet in dance- Feb 8, 1989.

<sup>31</sup> 'Honesty with one's body' and 'Openness' are explained in the context of de-mystification in Chandralekha's dance where Padmini Says, 'For her the real work of de-mystification came actually in the dancer's own relationship with the body...where all of a sudden the female body was just that a female body that could even adopt sexuality without having to call itself a Nayika who is devoted to the lord in order to express sexuality'. Personal Interview with Padmini Chettur, a senior dancer with Chandralekha's troupe, who worked with her for almost a decade. 16.03.2006

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- <sup>32</sup> Personal communication with Padmini Chettur, a senior dancer with Chandralekha, 16.03.2006
- <sup>33</sup> Vajrajawala or Agnisala is represented with one palm over the other with fingers extended. See Lokesh Chandralekha.1978.147p
- <sup>34</sup> Galini mudra is used to gaze at the sun during the conduct of *sandhya vandanam* at *Aditya upasthanam* or the mid-day oblation where the sun is invoked to 'purify and regenerate' oneself (C.N.V 1984,36)
- <sup>35</sup> For an earlier discussion on ida and pingala, see pg
- <sup>36</sup> This had been attempted earlier in Raga where Chandralekha tried looking at the 'femininity' in Men.
- <sup>37</sup> The thumb of the left held by the fingers of the right hand is called Thathagata-mushti mudra. See Lokesh Chandra.1978,147p
- <sup>38</sup> Two yoni mudras are used here. The first shown here is formed by joining two ardhachandra hasta which meet at the thumb and the fingers suggestive of the trikona space. The other is formed like the shape of the vagina.
- <sup>39</sup> Bhaddakonasana (cobbler's pose) is done with knees bent on the sides such the heels and toes of both legs touch each other.
- <sup>40</sup> Chandralekha understands male and female not on the basis of gender but in the form of feminine and masculine energies inherent in each one of them.
- <sup>41</sup> The yoni that signifies both vagina and womb is involved in the process of creation and re-creation.
- <sup>42</sup> Qtd in Menon,Suresh. 2001
- <sup>43</sup> Tattva Yoga mudra is formed by holding two shikara hasta together.
- <sup>44</sup> In Mahakaal, Chandralekha used such a motif to represent 'Time as endless moment' where Abhinavagupta's concept of Kshana vaada was understood as the 'pulsating moment from birth to birth', to depict 'Spandana-the eternal moment' and where Kshana is conceived as 'between ending and beginning of worlds' (Chandralekha 1997)
- <sup>45</sup> Qtd in McCarthy, Justin. 1992
- <sup>46</sup> Chandralekha expresses her thoughts on these areas in interviews with C.S.Lakshmi 2003,130-133; Ranvir Shah 1994.
- <sup>48</sup> This pose resembles a stretched bow.
- <sup>49</sup> Qtd in Maheshwari, Belu. 1997.
- <sup>50</sup> Qtd in Lakshmi.C.S. 2003, 132
- <sup>51</sup> Qtd in Basak, Jhuma. 1997.
- <sup>52</sup> Qtd in Subramaniam, Arundhati. 1998.
- <sup>53</sup> See pg 196 where the image of Matsya is explained as symbolically representing mind and prana.

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<sup>54</sup> It is one of the initial exercise sequences where a tap on the ground with both palms gives enough balance and momentum to launch both the fists forward. It encompasses torso bends, arm and leg extensions all of which are explored close to ground level. The sequence ends with the practitioner doing a one leg kneel one after the other with both legs as he bows down to the earth.

<sup>55</sup> Sharira at the practice session performed by Shaji and Tishani personally viewed at Chandralekha's place, 21-9-2006. And Sharira at Kamani Auditorium, New Delhi, August 31, 2005: Sangeet Natak Akademi video recording.

<sup>56</sup> The work is subtitled as Fire/ Desire i.e., Sharira- Fire/Desire

<sup>57</sup> 'Soundaryalahari', a ninth century text by Adishankaracharya, was the inspiration for Chandralekha's 'Yantra'-1994. For Chandralekha, 'soundarya' (Beauty) and 'ananda' (joy) are areas that open to an understanding that 'there was no real difference between sexuality and spirituality, between eroticism and asceticism'. (Chandralekha, 1994)

<sup>58</sup> The genetic material or blue print of every living being is present in its chromosomes in the chemical form of Di-Nucleic acid known as DNA. The DNA consists of the female XX or male XY chromosomal combination. DNA blue print is structured like a helix.

<sup>59</sup> Personal communication with Chandralekha and Sadanand Menon, Feb 13, 2006 at Chandralekha's residence.

<sup>60</sup> See pg 153, Chapter-3 for discussion on this dealt here.

<sup>61</sup> Balasaraswati, commenting on the trends of running or dancing across the length and breadth of the stage, likens it to an animal that has been caged that goes round and round it. (1959. p 159)

<sup>62</sup> The concept of Shakta Tantra explained in Saraswati, 1998.

<sup>63</sup> Tantric thoughts personify women as Shakti. The rising Kundalini is considered Feminine and known as 'ascending shakti'. Sometimes, tantrics, who perform tantric acts reduce female sexual partner to a mere channel to realize themselves which is considered misogynist.

<sup>64</sup> Chandralekha's writing about various ancient iconographic sculptures. Date unknown.

<sup>65</sup> Raga, on search for Femininity actually had adapted moves of massage techniques from Kalaripayattu set to the slow pace of dance.



## Conclusion

This research, which has focused on three major areas in the history of Bharatanatyam, has worked at finding paradigmatic changes made to the form. The first of the three areas that have been dealt with include issues surrounding the hegemonic intervention of the local politicians and those surrounding the politics of presentation of Devadasi on the Madras Music Academy stage. The next, has ensued with interpreting the 'spiritualising' agenda encompassed by an exclusiveness pursued by Rukmini Devi which permeated both her solo and Dance drama compositions. And finally, the developing of an empowering language of body and dance in Chandralekha's choreographies that has rendered an internalization and inclusiveness of concepts from Indian cultural thought that at the same time sorted to show difference to the interfaces of ritualization and mechanization that had crept into the dance form.

The entire Devadasi reform movement which was to have aimed at removing the shackles of caste and gender based professional vulnerability that surrounded the devadasi, where, she was gradually turned to a passive sex object, got lost in the clamour to get her married and ultimately the very identity of the devadasi was nullified and obscured to create the stage for entry of 'respectable women'. During this time, we saw how, when the 1929 Madras act of enfranchising devadasis with *inams* and *manyams* was just tip of an iceberg, the introduction of 'Prevention of Dedication' Bill in 1930 by Muthulakshmi Reddy showed the initial signs to the enormity of an impending disaster yet to strike the hereditary community. But, it was the delay in the enactment of the Prevention of Dedication Bill characterized by an indifference and reluctance shown by some senior conservative congress men like C.Rajagopalachari and S.Satyamurthy to name a few, that only

seemed intentional as the fact remains for us to see that devadasis who left their profession either started teaching privately (like in the case of Mylapore Gowriammal or Karaikkal Saradammal who taught at Kalakshetra) or went into oblivion. They never came to limelight as professional proscenium dancers.

Amongst these events, it was Music academy that played a significant start in relocating a major thrust of the devadasi argument from the strategy of the reformists to that of the revivalists- from the 'reform of devadasi' to the 'revival of dance'. It worked on creating and projecting a 'then and now' of the dance, widening the gap of opposition between both. Thus the polarity that extended to represent Bharatanatyam as a 'great' and 'unexceptionable' art from the 'ancient' past was meant to place Sadir on a scale that was diametrically opposite to show its rapidly declining and 'ill-reputed' present.

Devadasis, on the Music Academy stage, were objectified and looked at as a kind of the 'other' who had 'crude' elements to be 'cleansed' of. They became mere pawns used on a well manipulated stage to subsequently gather and mobilize women from 'respectable families' who would project the gendered stereotypical Indian female. In short, the politics of presentation which the Music academy engaged in its formative years involved constructing devadasis as 'the Other', tuned towards canonization of the dance as 'classical'. The 'Otherness' of the devadasi was essentialized, locked in time and objectified by initiating a discourse through presenting performances of devadasis on the academy's stage and encouraging discussions revolving around her dance. Thus a 'sullied Sadir' of the hereditary dancer from the precincts of the Holy temple was waiting at the threshold of proscenium stage to undergo purificatory rites prescribed by self-appointed cultural priests or

ambassadors to turn itself into 'blessed Bharatanatyam' of the non-hereditary dancer.

Rukmini Devi's thrust on essentialising the devadasi dance as having had become 'a means for remembering the body rather than of forgetting it' meant that such a denouncement became an easy epithet in creating a recourse to Remembering to forget the body or in Forgetting to remember the body. Both ways, confrontations were meant to be avoided by replacing the devadasis's body with a 'spiritualised' body which only remembered ancient myths and texts and forgot and compromised devadasi's dance history. And this equally connoted Rukmini Devi's belief that dance was 'essentially spiritual' and that only *bhakti rasa* had a place in such a spiritual art. Rukmini Devi referred to this process as 'cleaning up and spiritualizing'

I find that this agenda thus formulated and affirmed by Besant, Arundale and Pandit Subramanya Sastri, had as its major contents-'revival of Bharata Natya' and 'regeneration of India': 'revival of Bharatanatyam' with reference to all that Rukmini Devi did with the dance form and spiritual 'regeneration' of India through 'beauty and art' from the main concepts of Theosophy. A path was tended to and determined by Arundale for projecting Rukmini Devi as a potent arbitrator of Indian 'renaissance' that would help in 'India's rebirth' and to 'redeem' India. Besant provided a pedestal for Rukmini Devi to become a 'Devi' and Arundale equipped the Devi with necessary attributes. It was now Rukmini Devi's turn, idolized as Devi, bestowed upon the duty of a resuscitator of the best in Indian arts and as a guide towards the path showing spiritual power of Lord Nataraja, to carry the strategy forward. I have looked at the ways in which she combined various strands of her ideals to perpetuate her dance as representing the quintessential theme of 'the

brand spiritualism' through : re-positioning Bharata Natyam's origin; designating and legitimizing her role; developing counter strategies; pro-validating her creative ventures; extrapolating on the purpose/function of dance.

Rukmini Devi, resorted to constructing 'spiritualism' in dance which was constantly prodded by binary prefixtures like – 'real', 'true', 'pure', 'elevates', 'uplift', 'beauty', 'refinement', 'divine', 'highest ideals', 'authentic', 'clean' - ones that had underlying binary oppositional connotations. She propagated her brand of 'spirituality' through changes manifested in costume, items of the repertoire, placement of musicians on stage, musical instruments used for the performance, pitch of singing, replacement of traditional nattuvanars singers with vocalists specialized in cutcheri music, deletion of erotic portions of padams, inclusion of kritis, creating a temple-stage aesthetics by conducting puja before performance, placing idol of Nataraja on stage and so on as has been discussed in this research. Thus she was successful in creating a dialogue tangentially opposite to the characteristic features that she had accused the devadasi of.

Rukmini Devi's dance-dramas based on narration of popular mythological stories of Ramayana or Mahabharata or songs that described of the various attributes and greatness of Gods and relied on *namasankeertanas* found a greater relevance during this period. Rukmini Devi created her dance-dramas to be classic examples of her ideal vision. The dance-dramas she created were a culmination of her understanding of Indian cultural values, her training in Bharatanatyam and her inimitable style of creativity. Though the former two were preconditioned by her response to various contexts, her artistic creativity enhanced the appeal of her style with which she built a steady set

of dance-dramas. She created it to be showcases to represent the pinnacles of Indian cultural and religious thoughts.

In the fourth chapter, we saw how Chandralekha's aesthetic questions the reduction of the body to merely something pretty or ornamental. She celebrates the intense play between the subtle and the manifest body and its expression through the purity of line and the extension and dilation of the energy field. Her works reflect her search for a unifying force in our lives, to replenish and present the body as an unending resource for energizing the micro and macrocosmic universe. This is a force that enables to sustain the energy and vitality of human body, unleash its ultimate potential and adapt to changing times.

As Chandralekha's themes dealt specifically with the condition of female, with all the strength derived from Angika, Prana, where usage of strength gained from understanding of body principles, was focused to start a dialogue to explore the Body-female body. Also commented upon were the male body where femaleness or femininity was explored. Immenseness of the empowered female body is the characteristic difference visible from *Sri* woman to *Sloka* woman where it meant an understanding of undifferentiated body, its journey from femininity to realizing equanimity of both male and female amongst every being.

From creative imagery visualized through the playful riddles of Bhaskaracharya's *Lilavati* (1989), exploring commonness of yoga and dance in *Prana* (1990), accentuated power of women in *Sri* (1991), Body- Abstract- in *Yantra* (1994), time and timelessness in *Mahakaal* (1995), Hidden Femininity explored in *Raga* (1998), Self and Renewal in *Sloka* (1999), and Body ascending in *Sharira* (2001), Chandralekha's choreographies flow from one into the other, the recurrent motifs reminding us of her concept of cyclic

notions of time known to us as the *Kaalasarpa* (Primordial Serpent). The concepts which emerged from these linkages were what Chandralekha carried throughout all her choreographic works. Her experiments were aimed at inscribing or embodying these concepts on the dancers. It evolved as an internalizing process which tried developing a different body language for the dancer, mainly the female dancer.

Rukmini Devi divested Bharatanatyam and the dancing body of its sexuality and upheld the spiritual aspect- the spiritual body. Devadasi's dancing body was a culmination of sexuality, sensuality and spirituality though the society made the body a vortex or a selling point of sexuality. Chandralekha's dancer's unbent body was consciously chosen to represent 'sexuality' not with respect to /not in terms of the transgressed sexuality of devadasi's body or the so called transcended spiritual dancing body of Rukmini Devi. It was but a transformed triumphant body which became a culmination of the body 'sexual, sensual and spiritual' transforming itself from the mercy of usurpers and rescuers at different times in dance history to proclaim an honest and triumphant holistic body.

As this academic work has focused on two very important dancer-choreographers of the Indian dance scene, it is felt that this work will contribute towards enriching critical data available, by raising pertinent questions associated with their work and contribution to the form, and, create platforms for future dialogues to different ways of understanding a dynamic art form like dance. Interpreting and analyzing performances or choreographies, having been looked at as an open-ended process, provides a wider canvas for a process that supports and nourishes the scope of evolving critical paradigms that empowers dance- its history and performing futures- as an open text.

## Glossary

**Abhinaya-** Expressions conveyed in dance or drama by means of voice, gestural language, bodily/ facial expressions

**Adavu-** A basic movement unit of dance

**Adukkumaala-** Necklace/ chain with close-graded pattern

**Adbhuta** – Surprise

**Agastya-** Name of a sage

**Alapadma-** Hasta held with fingers opened up to denote for example: a fully bloomed flower

**Alokita drishti-** Keen glance

**Alolita shira-** Head moved round and round

**Anga bharamari-** Flight movement engaging a major use of torso

**Anga, pratyanga and Upanga-** Major and minor limbs of the body

**Apsaras-** Angels or fairies

**Archakas-** Temple priests

**Ardhachandra-** Half moon

**Ardha halasana-** The legs and the torso raised up from sarvangasana form a 60 degree angle with the hands straightened at the back on

the ground. This is half-plough pose

**Ardhanarishwara-** The form of Shiva-Parvathi existing as half man-half woman.

**Ayata-** Half sitting posture

**Bhramari-** Flight movement

**Bhujangasana-** from lying flat on the tummy, the palms held in line with shoulders are raised up with the head. It appears like the hood of a snake

**Bindu-** A reverberating dot

**Chalana-** Walk

**Cutcheri-** Recital

**Dasiattam-** Dance of the Dasis or servants of Gods.

**Devadasi-** Literally translated as ‘servant of God’, Devadasis represent a class of woman who are married to a temple deity and who do obligatory services and duties at a temple.

**Dhanurasana-** Bow-pose where the tummy is rested on the ground with hands holding both heels of the bent and upraised legs. The head is held erect

**Dola hasta-** Position where both arms are kept away from body but let down on either sides.

**Drishti bheda-** Movements of the eyes

**Drishti-** Sight

**Ekapada-** Posture on single-leg

**Gajjai puja-** Prayer for the ankle bells

**Garudam-** Posture with a leg extended backwards and another with a bent knee in the front

**Garuda mandala-** Posture of Eagle

**Gomukhasana**

**Greeva-** Of the neck

**Hanumanasana-** A complete split

**Jathiswaram-** An item in Bharatanatyam repertoire where nritta is done to sung jathis or sollukattus and swara passages set to raga/s

**Jatayu-** The name of a mythological eagle.

**Jati-** Pnemonics

**Kaala-** It denotes time

**Katakamukha-** Hasta held by closing in index, mid finger and thumb together with ring and little fingers away from the others

**Kathakalakshepam-** A form of cultural activity that involves rendering of mythological story

with singing of intermediary passages

**Kalaripayattu** –Martial art form of Kerala

**Kartari-** Hasta shaped like scissors with all fingers bound by thumb except index and mid fingers

**Korvai-** A set of adavu patterns ending in a theermanam.

**Kripalaga-** Leap using upraising of alternate feet

**Kriti-** A form of bhakti lyric set to a raga/s which consists of pallavi, anupallavi and charanam

**Kudittu mettadavu-** An adavu consisting of kunchita and sama moves

**Kunchita-** Position of feet placement where only toe touches the floor

**Kuttana-** Pounding

**Madhyama laya gati-** Medium speed

**Mei adavu-** Movement made extensively using the torso and to a lesser extent using the other limbs

**Motita-** Full sitting position in Muzhumandi with one knee touching the ground

**Mushti-** Fist



**Muzhumandi-** Full sitting posture where knees are completely bent and position is balanced on both the toes

**Naamasankeertana-** Song in praise by chanting the different names of a deity

**Nattuvaanar-** Conductor of a dance recital who wields cymbals

**Natyarambha-** Horizontally extended position of arms depicting for eg: beginning of dance

**Navagraha-** The nine planets as mentioned in the Hindu astrological system

**Nautch-** It is a corrupted form of Nach meaning -to dance

**Nishachari-** One who walks/prowls during the night

**Nritta-** It comprises of dance without employing facial abhinaya

**Oddiyanam-** Waist ornament or cummerbund

**Pakhawaj-** A percussion instrument

**Pallu-** The extreme end of a saree

**Patrapravesham-** Entry / introductory scene

**Prakampita greeva-** Neck moved back and forth

**Preritam-** An ayata with extension or gap between the feet

**Rakshasa-** Demon

**Sadir-** It is the one of the old names of Bharatanatyam

**Sama-** Levelled position

**Sarana chari-** Slow movement with feet together

**Sarukkal adavu-** Sliding adavu

**Sethubandhasana-** This is done with back and torso completely bent with only the feet and the palms on the floor. It is also called Ardhachakrasana

**Shakata-** Depicting rakshasa

**Shalabasana-** Lying on the tummy, the head is raised along with both the legs together the hands are placed below each of the legs. It resembles a grasshopper.

**Shashankasana-** Known as the moon or rabbit pose, it is done by sitting on ones bent knees with toes flat on ground. The straight torso is then brought down to touch the ground with the forehead as the arms hold the heels.

**Sollukattu-** Pnemonics

**Srichakra-** Yantra form of *Sri* or any deity

**Surpanakha-** Ravana's sister, a demoness

**Svasthika-** Intercrossed position

**Tejas-** Illustrious, brilliance

**Thattimettu-** A movement pattern of the legs where the toes are alternately tapped and heel raised and let down

**Theermanam-** A conclusive ending to a Korvai using a three set pattern of repetition of theididithei or kitatakatarikitatom.

**Thillana-** An item in Bharatanatyam repertoire where jathis are executed to Sollus sung in particular raga with a couple of lines expressed through gestural language and facial expression

**Usi-** A variation of thatheitheita adavu done with arms taken around in a circle in alapadma hasta

**Utplavana-** Jump

**Vasishtasana-** this is where the body balances itself on both the feet and one of the hands the other hand is held extended upwards. The line of the body is held inclined to the ground

**Vegini-** Running

**Virabhadrasana-** The hands and one of the legs are held horizontally extended in line as the body balances itself on one straightened leg placed on the floor.

**Vrikshasana-** it is held balancing on one leg with the other's feet placed at the side of the straight leg's knee. Hands are extended, upraised and held together with an anjali

**Yantra-** It generally means a device

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