

BALASARASWATI - A LIFE'S TRUE DEDICATION TO BHARATANATYAM

by Nandini Ramani

“Enneramum Undan Sannidhiyil Irukka Venum Ayya Ponnayya” - the moving melody of Devagandhari filled the atmosphere sung by a voice laden with Bhava and the lines were being depicted in abhinaya by a disciple as taught by her teacher in front; suddenly the voice got choked with emotion and the student saw tears trickling down of the singer - teacher. The student rushed to find out and console her guru at this moment of emotional outburst. The guru then showed in gestural language at first and repeated in words to the student - “because of you, I am now in Chidambaram; you’ve taken me there literally through this session of the Padam. I have now envisaged Him”. The teacher was the great Bala (Balasaraswati) and the student being the author of this article. Such was the unique involvement of Bala for whom Bharatanatyam was the sole pursuit of life. She was indeed an “Ekaagrachitta” - “concentrated mentally on only one aim”, that was dancing.

The memory of Bala, whose 10th death anniversary falls on 9th February, is a cherished fragrance to those who were fortunate to witness her great art. A great follower of the Tanjore Tradition, as handed over to her by Sri. Kandappa Pillai, also of the Tanjore line, Bala adhered to her Sampradaya in the strict manner until her last performance. Following a full margam of repertoire even at her ripe old age, a perfect araimandi, well executed “kitatarikitatom”, chiseled hasta and pada viniyogas, marked the heights of purity and standard in her recitals. Her excellence in Nritta (pure dance) was a special feature that deserve mention, for many know her only as the “Queen of Abhinaya”; she thrilled the audience with her limitless offerings of exquisite abhinaya which were unique in their own way, as serene representations of “visualised form of music” through the medium of Bharatanatyam.

The art of Balasaraswati was one of pristine quality that was based more on a Bhakti-oriented approach. Her handling of the sentiment of Srngara, was unique in its own way that it was always coated with dignity. Her strong belief in Traditional aspects of the art gave her a unique status in the “World of Dance”. Her mingling into one with any composition that she performed or taught was something special as her imagination in improvising for the lyrical content were marked with spontaneity and scholarship of the highest order. Her extraordinary skill for abhinaya would immerse the student or the viewer in a state of ecstasy and joy. In this respect, she could be best described as “Abhinaya Mahodadhi” (Great ocean in the art of mime). Subtlety and propriety (Aucitya) were unique features of her inimitable technique.

As a strict disciplinarian, Bala seemed a tough personality for many who did not understand her well. A very light-hearted, colorful, simple woman that Bala was, her life was filled with several hardships that were entwined with her art,

and that gave her a personality that was somewhat unapproachable for many; she had to be so, more for the upkeep of the strict traditional values of her art. She reached the pinnacle of her career, but Bala's chosen path was not one strewn with roses. Nothing worked out easily for her; Her patience, perseverance, utmost reverence to her Guru and Sampradaya, total dedication to the art and her "dutiful attitude" towards her art, brought her name and fame, nationally and internationally; the 1961 Edinburgh Festival and 1962 American Dance Festival where she was given standing ovations for her performances and applauded by none other than Ted Shawn himself; were all the initial glories that came her way from when there was no looking back.

If Bharatanatyam is so well known in the West, it is mainly due to the inimitable Bala who introduced to the Western audiences the "intricacies and nuances" of this form that is mainly a "solo performance" (Ekaharya) "as it is meant to be". Even in the 30's and the 40's it was the responsible attitude of Bala who through her whole life dedicated to this art kept up the flag high above many others of her times. The truth lies in the fact that it depended on a person like Bala to keep this beautiful art form flourish, irrespective of any personal benefit for her own self and make the society realize the glorious values of Bharatanatyam, so that others could emulate Bala or start on what they called as renaissance of this art. Whatever happened around her, Bala was there all the time, dancing on to reach the Supreme, without aiming for name, fame, money or awards.

Padma Bhushan, Padma Vibhushan, Sangeeta Kalanidhi, Isai Perarignar, Desikottama and the Central Sangeet Natak Academy Award were some of the honours bestowed on Bala by various prestigious institutions.

Bala, was a stern "old time" teacher who never openly appreciated or encouraged her students, but gave them the best of the art and inculcated in them a spirit of sincerity and devotion in their artistic mission; She was indeed a "Mauna Guru", for she suggested "silently" the various do's and don'ts of the art through her own life and art by which she claimed a magnificent status that remains unparalleled till today. For those who have known her closely, the lovable memories of not only her fine artistic expressions but also her humanistic approaches in life will linger forever.

"Na Bhooto Na Bhavishyati" - Never before was there one to be and never will be in future - such was the artistic genius of Balasaraswati and such was the unique status of the one and only BALA.

Apart from the Music Academy, among the prominent cultural platforms in this city that supported the art of Balasaraswati, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha occupies an important place and some of Bala's memorable performances were presented took here. It is most befitting that during its Swarna Jayanthi Mahotsavam, this renowned organisation which fosters Bharatanatyam and Natya in its larger perspective, is saluting the memory of one of the outstanding artistes of India, and adores her contribution in the field of Dance.