

RUKMINI DEVI'S CONTRIBUTION TO BHARATA NATYAM

by Sarada Hoffman

A great woman and a daughter of Mother India was born in 1904. Her name - Rukmini Devi. It is said that the temple nagaswaram was playing while she entered this earth. How very significant to be heralded by music from the temple! She certainly deserved such a welcome.

To fully understand Rukmini Devi's contribution to Bharata Natyam, it is necessary to understand her as a person. Dedicated artists infuse their work with their personalities and those who knew Rukmini Devi intimately saw her character, values, and intensions expressed in her creations.

Rukmini Devi was born in 1904 to parents who were theosophists and who raised her with the values and principles of that movement, a knowledge her soul was familiar with from the past. It was only a natural blossoming of her inner nature. Her family lived near the Theosophical society estate in Adyar, and she came into close contact with Annie Besant, Charles Leadbeater and George Arundale whom she regarded as her gurus.

She was an attractive young lady with all the womanly grace and refinement. A symbol of Indian womanhood. Her marriage to George Arundale at the age of sixteen was a recognition of the spiritual bond she shared with him and the other theosophical leaders. Annie Besant accepted George Arundale and Rukmini Devi as her son and daughter and Rukmini Devi always talked about the wonderful love and training she received from her. This learning was through experience and so a lasting strength for her life's work. From the time of her marriage onwards Rukmini Devi worked with theosophical leaders and devoted her life to the service of humanity.

Early theosophical leaders including Annie Besant dedicated their lives to the search for an all-embracing truth as a way of realizing the Divine. One who follows this path seeks the highest and most noble expression in every endeavor be it intellectual pursuit, manual labour, science or art. This tendency can be recognized in Rukmini Devi's later efforts in the field of education, animal welfare and art. Education without fear to develop the full potential of the individual, elimination of cruelty towards animals to develop compassion in their custodians, art without vulgarity to uplift the audience to an experience of beauty - all point in the same direction towards a more noble, true and spiritual way of living.

Annie Besant and George Arundale were much engaged in the educational work in India and were also great friends of India and contributed more to its emergence as a free nation than is often acknowledged. Rukmini Devi said that she learnt to understand India and its philosophy and culture from Annie Besant. A clear perception of beauty emanated from the inspiration she derived from this contact.

Rukmini Devi displayed a lot of originality and leadership even in her youth. She grew from a tumid young lady to an outstanding leader of the youth bringing fresh ideas to the theosophical circles. It was only appropriate that she was made the

president of the Young Theosophist group. As her artistic talents emerged, she added art presentation to the other activities to inspire and enthuse the young. She spoke on art of living and the fine arts as a means to add beauty and joy to life. They were inspiring talks coming out of her intuitive knowledge. Many were drawn to her and to the youth movement. The Theosophical society was becoming aware of a new expression of theosophy through the qualities of beauty and compassion.

The Arundales traveled a lot for theosophical work and visited many countries. During these travels Rukmini Devi attended many music concerts and ballet performances and saw many museums and exhibitions of art. This exposure stimulated her interest in culture and beauty.

Another personality whom Rukmini Devi recognized as a spiritual teacher was Anna Pavlova. Many have written about how Rukmini Devi happened to see her ballet performance in Bombay and was struck by the life flowing from this dancer. After seeing her in Bombay Rukmini Devi had opportunities to meet Pavlova while they were traveling in Australia. She attended many of Pavlova's programmes and became a close friend of hers. It was by the suggestion of Pavlova she began learning ballet under Cleo Nordi who was a senior pupil of Pavlova. Recognizing the inherent grace in Rukmini Devi's form, it was Pavlova who suggested that Rukmini Devi should take up Indian dancing.

On returning to India Rukmini Devi began to look for possibilities to learning classical dancing. With the help of her brother and friends she went about seeing the temple dance programmes. As she described it, the dance technique was good and the dancers were devoted people but they lacked aesthetic sensitivity and knowledge. Although the dance was an offering to god in the temples, the spiritual content of the dance itself needed to be elevated to suit Rukmini Devi's intensions.

After months of searching she found the right teacher in Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai but she had to persuade him to teach her. He was quite reluctant to teach as she came from a Brahmin family and felt she would not have the determination to work as the dance required physical stamina. However, putting her to a minor test, he was impressed with her graceful walk and elegant neck movement. He accepted her as a student and soon realized her potential. She excelled in every aspect of the dance and was dedicated to the art in the purest sense. She was also willing to work long hours to accomplish the standard her teacher expected of her. Further more she brought a spiritual quality to the dance, which was a natural expression of her personality and the addition of this quality to the dance inspired her teacher as well, because he could see that she was different from the rest. With her creative imagination Rukmini Devi composed many Bharata Natya items that covered the full range of the dance form. Her access to musicians and scholars helped her to develop an original perspective. She wanted inspired and elevating music which she found in Thyagaraja, Dikshidar and Papanasam Sivan to mention a few. She used a wide range of Indian mythological material for interesting stories and characters. She composed dances specifically to emphasize the purest and noble aspects of emotions consistent with her views. In suppressing sensuality in favour of purity, she did not leave out any of the

emotions, rather all emotions were expressed in their purest form. There was a lot of variety in her abhinaya with subtle details and quick changes.

Rukmini Devi studied Bharata Natyam of her day and then transcended it. She demonstrated a high level of the art form that could lead to spiritual experience and growth that with dedication becomes a way to experience the divine. This aspiration is a special quality of true Indian art that Rukmini Devi mentioned so many times in her lectures. When she began thrilling audiences all over India with her grace and spiritual quality of her dancing, Indians woke up to the greatness of Bharata Natya and the outburst of interest and enthusiasm was tremendous.

The new emphasis that Rukmini Devi brought to her dance changed the quality and appearance of Bharata Natya and formed a style which later came to be recognized as the Kalakshetra style. Not satisfied with her own experience and personal success, she wanted to protect the dance and make it available to future generations. As she was already connected with the theosophical, educational programs along with Dr. Arundale, it was a natural outcome to create a center for the arts. This was the birth of the International Academy of the Arts, which was later named Kalakshetra.

At Kalakshetra Rukmini Devi assembled outstanding dance teachers, scholars and musicians to provide students with an excellent education in dance and associated arts. Other art forms were offered in addition to dance. It was her feeling that with appreciation of other arts, a dancer is a more complete artist and can express better beauty in dance. Her emphasis was always on refinement in life and the arts and to remind that life and art are inseparable. What we know and practice in life is what we can express in the art form. To support this ideal she created an environment for the blossoming of the spirit while learning the arts.

Rukmini Devi's unifying vision of art, education and spiritual growth had its root in her Theosophical background and this was a unique influence that she brought to the realm of Bharata Natyam. Its implementation at Kalakshetra was done in a way that beautifully retained the Indian spirit at the core of the art. Rukmini Devi's regard for Indian culture which she had learned from Annie Besant was amply displayed in Kalakshetra and not only in the arena of the dance. The teacher-student relationships, the way of dress, the architecture of the classrooms and even decorations for special events, all exemplified Indian culture applied to the purpose of creating beauty. So much of the character of the center and its work depended on Rukmini Devi's direct involvement. The work was the outcome of her dedication to these ideals and her consistent expression of them as a dancer, as a teacher, as a composer and as the leader of the institutions.

It is time to give serious thought to the fundamentals of our culture and art for these reflect our values as individuals and as a society. Rukmini Devi showed us that it was important to conquer the desire to shine superficially and go to the depths of true understanding, then there can be beauty in the expression of art and beauty in living as well. In her work with dance and in other areas she gave her life's energy to lead us forward. It was a noble life, generously giving for the benefit of others.