

Rukmini Devi Arundale & her journey to Kalakshetra

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ABSTRACT :-

Rukmini Devi Arundale, a Bharatnatyam exponent and theosophist, was the founder of Kalakshetra. She was not only exposed to just theosophical society ideas, but also to new ideas on culture, theatre, music and dance. Later she decided to marry a prominent British theosophist Dr. George Arundale, a close associate of Annie Besant and also the Principal of Central Hindu College, Varanasi. Rukimni Devi Arundale visited Bombay to see the performance of the famous Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova. After that, their friendship grew and soon she decided to start learning dance. It was later at the behest of Anna Pavlova, that Rukmini Devi turned her attention to discover traditional Indian dance forms. She started learning and then at the age of 31 she invited hundreds of people to watch her first dance performance. It was very difficult for her to sustain and survive with dance in those days because at that time dance was practised and performed only by the women of a particular caste who were called devadasis. Later she decided to move on with her own life vision. The day when she performed for the first time in front of hundreds of people, there was a small young child of about six years, named Sarda Hoffman. She was overwhelmed and surprised by watching Rukmini Ji's dance and later she decided to start learning dance too. When Rukmini Devi Arundale started teaching, Sarda Hoffman was her first student.

With all the help of Mr. E. Krishna Iyer she established the dance form by her first public performance. In 1936, along with her husband she established Kalakshetra, an academy of dance and music. It was built in the ancient Indian Gurukul System. Rukmini Devi Arundale, who had been instrumental in modifying Bharatnatyam, tried to bring it into global attention

by removing the extraneous and erotic elements from the dance association in the past. Very soon she changed the face of the dance by introducing musical instruments, set and light designing elements and innovative costumes and jewelry inspired by the sculptures of temples.

Rukmini Devi Arundale approached noted scholars for inspiration and classical musicians and artists for their collaboration. The result was the creation of some pioneering dance dramas based on Indian epics like Valmiki's 'Ramayana' and Jayadeva's 'Gita Govinda'. Later many students joined Kalakshetra and started learning dance. People from different parts of the world started learning dance at Kalakshetra. In the documentary, we get the information about all the students coming from different parts of the country who were of different religions and caste. The teachers of

Kalakshetra say that they may have different religious affiliations, but eventually they visit the same place for their worship and to the same person. Many of them belonged to reputed families. Some of them had completed their high school education and later decided to learn dance in Kalakshetra. Some of their parents were well established, like doctors, engineers, etc. With the days passing by people started accepting dance forms and believed that Indian classical dances were the origin and the eventual heritage of India. After that Rukmini Devi Arundale started working on her own Kalakshetra style of Bharatnatyam. She introduced group performances and staged Bharatnatyam based ballets.

INTRODUCTION :-

On 29th of February 1904, Rukmini Devi was born to Neelakantha Sastry, in Madurai, Tamil Nadu. She was one of the eight siblings. She moved from place to place since childhood because of her father being an engineer. She writes about having a happy childhood in a short biographical note, "I have had the fortune of having the most understanding and loving parents. No discipline was imposed on us, but traditional values and correct behaviour we learnt automatically by watching them. . . Father was . . . very forward thinking and disliked many of the narrow prejudices, the caste distinctions, animal sacrifices, etc. which were part

of our religion in those days". The siblings were deeply impacted by the values of the father. It was because of him, Theosophical Society came into existence. She writes, "He liked the teachings of the Theosophists which freed religion from superstition. . ." He moved in with his family to the newly bought land next to the Theosophical Society estate in Adyar

after he retired. Rukmini grew up under the guidance of inspiring influential people like Dr. Annie Besant, Dr. George Sydney Arundale, CW Leadbeater among other thinkers and theosophists of the time.

The family grew close to Dr. George Arundale, a distinguished Theosophist and an associate of Dr. Annie Besant after the death of Neelakantha Sastry. Years later, Dr. Arundale, her senior by 24 years proposed to marry then 16 year old Rukmini. Madras was shocked to hear such unorthodox proposals. People started protesting in full vigour. This was only the begin-ning of the many hardships to come along the way of this extraordinary woman's life.

The whole city of Madras couldn't accept the fact of an upper class Brahmin girl marrying out of caste and that too to an Englishman. In the year of 1920, they got married with support from Dr. Annie Besant and her family. They had a civil marriage in Mumbai and then they went to Europe to study on matters of theosophy. She was made President of the All India Federation of Young Theosophists in 1923 and in 1925, President of the World Federa-tion of Young Theosophists. In spite of all the differences and opposition, they stayed firm and worked together closely in education and arts complementing each other.

The years she started travelling with her husband Dr. Arundale, she came across the finest of the arts - theatre, music, painting, sculpture, opera and ballet. Being naturally inclined towards performing arts, she took lessons in classical western ballet from the legendary Russian bal-lerina Anna Pavlova. She was

gifted with the sense of aesthetics and beauty to pave the way in the world of performing arts. Her achievements as a young tamilian Brahmin woman appeared to be quite magical.

In 1933, Rukmini Devi was invited to watch a performance of two wonderful devadasi dancers by E Krishna Iyer who was a lawyer and a freedom fighter and sponsored the event. Rukmini Devi was moved and charmed by it. She wanted to take up the art. Henceforth creating social differences, opposed by a group of people, anti-dance movement took place against reviving Sadir. A Bill was initiated to be passed to ban dance in temples by Muthulakshmi Reddy. People were shocked to learn that a Brahmin girl was mixing up with devadasis.

In spite of being opposed by the whole state, Rukmini Devi nurtured her interest and started taking private dance lessons from a well-known devadasi Mylapore Gowri Amma. She was

supported by her husband and her family. She was also supported by The Theosophical Society which was headed by her husband after Annie Besant died. She was courageous and

audacious to present the art in public during the Diamond Jubilee Convention of The Theo-sophical Society in December of 1935. She also took lessons from another devadasi and the great master Pandanallur Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. There was a different crowd which

came out of curiosity and her confidence won them over. People such as Sir C P Ramaswamiyer and other leaders of the society and international theosophists found the performance to

be spiritual, beautiful & aesthetical.

She worked towards making the art form a socially accepted one. Hence, she embedded the value of art and introduced new music such as devotional ones to that of the erotic 'shringara' part of the songs. She was often criticized by her critics of sanitizing the art, but she just preferred to underplay the eroticism and focus more on aesthetics and elevate the art.

In the early period, the costumes worn by devadasis were not visually appealing as they wore sari on top of loosely fitted pyjamas, but their traditional ornaments were exquisite. When

going on stage, the dancers were followed by the musicians who looked uncouth while carrying clarinets and bagpipes.

To the perception of Rukmini Devi these were all very unaesthetic and so she started altering, adhering to art and aesthetics. She revolutionized the scenario herself. Musicians were made to sit in a row on one side of the stage. Inspired from traditional sculptures, she designed a new costume with the help of the Italian seamstress, Madame Cazan. She also experimented with lighting with the help of theatre artists who were also theosophists, namely Conrad Woldringh, Alex and Mary Elmore and created an alluring drama. The backdrops were changed so the dance could be presented in the right setting on the proscenium. These changed the overall feel of the dance form and are followed to this day. Her style of costume is still the prevalent one in the country.

In the August of 1935, Rukmini Devi and her husband Dr. Arundale met her brother Yagneswaran and a few friends to discuss the establishment of centre for performing arts. The next year on 6th January 1936, International Centre for Arts was born within the campus of the Theosophical Society, Adyar, in Chennai. Along with the support of her husband and their mentor Dr. Annie Besant, she headed the institution. This came to be known as 'Kalakshetra' in the future. While registering, Rukmini Devi wanted an Indian name and this was suggested by Pandit Subramaniam Sastri which was agreed upon by Dr. Arundale immediately. It is said that Rabindranath Tagore said, What a beautiful name....I wish I had thought of it myself

upon hearing the name from Rukmini Devi.

Rukmini Devi invited many renowned nattuvanars and dancers of that period to the institute to impart knowledge and teach. People like Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai who was Rukmini Devi's first teacher, Muthukumara Pillai, Chokkalingam Pillai and Karaikkal Saradambal Ammal

who was well known for her nritta. Dandayudapani Pillai joined later as well as Mylapore Gowri Ammal. This first generation of teachers bequeathed a list of styles and composition

inputs to the institute which structures the backbone of the style that is followed till date. This particular style came to be known as the 'Kalakshetra Style'. Rukmini Devi adapted this style herself and taught it to one of the first students Sarada Hoffman who later passed it on to the next generation who entered with precise perfection and a great deal of aesthetics. Krishnaveni (Lakshmanan), Ambika (Buch), Shanta (Dhananjayan), N S Jayalakshmi, Pushapa Shankar and many other early students became eminent performers and teachers of this style. S Sarada was a unique stalwart of this dance form who codified the theory and music for this style of dance.

In the Theosophical Society campus, Kalakshetra started its journey with one student, Radha (later known as Radha Burnier) who was niece to Rukmini Devi, her brother Sri Ram's daughter, and later to be the President of the Theosophical Society, under a single thatched class room with three mirrors (the famous kannadikottagai of Kalakshetra). She was joined by two other students soon, G Leelavati and A Sarada (Sarada Hoffman). Kalakshetra had an atmosphere reminiscent of a tapovan (penance grove) with thatched roof classes under trees and open air. This is how she introduced 'Bharatnatyam', the new name she gave to Sadir and made it socially acceptable.

She was inspired by traditional temple dramas and started choreographing her dance dramas, with help from legendary figures from the Indian music universe who composed music for the performances. She was modern in her approach and taste as she built a theatre for staging her dance dramas. Out of these 25 performances she choreographed, a six part series based on the Ramayana is notable.

Kalakshetra now stands for educational experience and is known for its adherence to classicism along with rigour, simplicity and elegance which gives it a hallmark of excellence.

Students here learn nuances of Bharatnatyam, Carnatic music (both vocal and instrumental) and Visual arts which meets the standards in theoretical study and practice. Students can choose to be interested in dance, music or arts as per their requirement.

Kalakshetra was then moved to its space campus by the seashore in Thiruvannamiyur, Chennai which is sprawling, sylvan 99 acre campus now, even if it had its genesis of the institution's philosophy bedrocked in the Theosophical Society.

In 1937, Rukmini Devi established a weaving centre with help from the Ministry of Labour and Industry grant. She was genuinely interested in indigenous crafts. She revived age old designs, kept the looms busy which produced sarees of alluring colours, motifs, high taste and quality. It still remains a work of art till this day. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay helped to revive the art of Kalamkari and vegetable dyes. Kalakshetra still holds The Crafts Education and Research Centre producing wonders.

As she was engrossed with education, she and her husband invited Maria Montessori to the Besant Theosophical High School to start Montessori courses. She introduced music as a subject and got the diploma course recognized by Madras University. Her vision was clear and insights advanced.

She was also very affectionate towards animals from childhood. So, when Prime Minister Nehru nominated her to the Rajya Sabha, she piloted a private member's bill for the prevention of cruelty towards animals, which was later passed as an act by the Parliament. She was also the first chairperson of the Animal Welfare Board and did remarkable things at the international

level. She was also involved with the vegetarian movement and the World Vegetarian Congress. Demands started flowing in as an ambassador of culture and the role she played after independence of India. Hence she stopped performing after joining the Rajya Sabha.

She was invited by Prime Minister Morarji Desai in 1977 to be an official candidate for the post of President of India which she declined and instead devoted her life to art and Kalakshetra. She was bestowed with numerous honours and awards including Padmabhushan, Fellow of Sangeet Natak Akademi, Prani Mitra Award, Desikottam award from Santiniketan, Kalidas Samman and many more.

She was quite a rebellious woman of her time. She lived a fruitful life and was a theosophist till her final days and believed in the ancient wisdom of Indian culture. Rukmini Devi is an icon of culture to this day and is a renaissance woman. She enriched the nation with the highest artistic traditions and values of life for which she will be remembered.

Rukmini Devi breathed her last on 24 February 1986. Kalakshetra was declared as an institution of national importance by an Act of Parliament - The Kalakshetra Foundation Act 1993. Kalakshetra is 'a way of life' and her students are legions in spreading art, culture and education.

Refrance-

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