

[The Lady Atop India's Top Arts Academy](#)

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By V. Gowri Shanker, Madras

"With no money, no land and no buildings I started this work in 1936 with one student under one tree-our only classroom. It was from such beginnings that the work has grown," related Rukmani Devi, founder of The Arts Academy at Kalakshetra near the sea south of Madras. "I never danced so that I might become famous. The work was undertaken in the spirit of great love and of service and never for fame or wealth. When I began to dance, dance was a forgotten art and not popular. I felt that the greatest service that India could render the world was to revive its own culture: for more than money or wealth, culture is the well spring of inspiration," she told students.

Rukmani's commitment to the arts was absolute. This was most eloquently demonstrated when she declined the offer to become the President of India. She was offered that ultimate distinction in 1977 by the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai. She knew that her commitment to Kalakshetra would be weakened by entry into politics.

At the Academy-commonly known as Kalakshetra-music, dancing, painting and crafts are taught to students of both sexes from India and other parts of the world. A Vedic gurukula ambience permeates the campus. Students are encouraged to lead simple lives. Teacher and the taught sit on the floor like they used to in ancient India. Everything is informal. Inside the campus the peace of nature dwells. There are no grandiose buildings, though many institutions are functioning here. The few

buildings are simple structures, many with thatched roofs.

Among its distinguished dance alumnae are Sarada Hoffman, Yamini Krishnamoorthy, Shanta and V.P. Dhananjayan, Adyar Lakshaman, Krishnaveni Lakshaman, Ambika Buch and Leela Samson, many of whom still maintain their links with the institution. M.D. Ramanathan was Kalakshetra's splendid gift to the world of carnatic music. Mani Krishnaswami, too, is a product of Kalakshetra, as is D. Pasupathy, the proficient vocalist.

Shanta and V.P. Dhananjayan [see page 28 story], who played lead roles in Rukmani Devi's productions, said: "She started composing dance dramas with us when we were still at a tender age and did not know what choreography meant. All we knew was to carry out her instructions faithfully. Now looking back it seems the concept of making the best use of the space available on the stage has been Rukmani's major contribution to theatrical art in India. Her clear perception and use of the space was pure magic."

Kalakshetra provides comprehensive training in diverse arts, including the designing and weaving of saris and tapestries. In the handloom weaving center the beautiful old patterns of South Indian saris that had fallen into disuse are revived. Kalamkari ["pencraft"] Centre was created in 1978 to revive the old craft of printing textiles using carved wooden blocks and natural dyes.

Quite often classes are held under the trees. Music is a subsidiary subject for all dance students. Everything in Kalakshetra is precise and well thought out. Exercises begin at 8:30 in the morning and continue until 11:30. After a break of two hours, the classes resume at 1:30 and go on until 4:30 pm. Yearly cost for a student run about US\$300.

### Early Life with the Theosophists

Rukmani Devi was born in an orthodox brahmin family on the 29th of February 1904-a leap year-in Madurai during the auspicious time of the Mahamagam Festival. Her father, Nilakanta Sastri, had joined the newly formed Theosophical Society. At

age seven Rukmani met C.W. Leadbeater, an eminent Theosophist with whom she developed a deep friendship, and Dr. Annie Besant, the society's president. Of this leading light, Rukmani Devi says, "Dr. Besant had a Western body but was a better Hindu than most of us. She taught me to respect my heritage."

One of the luminaries around Dr. Besant was Dr. George Sydney Arundale, an English-born educator. Arundale was the founder of Central Hindu College in Benares. He came from an aristocratic family which had produced painters and artists. A brahmin girl, Rukmani shocked the orthodox society of her time by her romance and marriage to Arundale when she was 16 and he in his mid-

thirties.

Her husband opened Rukmani's eyes to the splendor of Western art by exposing her to Europe's art galleries, museums, operas and dramas. A force that shaped Rukmani Devi's future at that time appeared in the form of rapturous artistry of a Russian ballerina, Anna Pavlova. In 1924 the Arundales were in London and went to see this prima ballerina at the Covent Gardens. Rukmani was fascinated. The Russian told her, "As an Indian you should take up Indian dancing"-

thus began her dance career at age twenty.

### Learning the Dance

Returning to Madras, Rukmani happened to see a recital of bharata natyam by Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai of Pandanalluvar. She would recall: "I was ushered into a new world of rhythmic beauty and meaning; and the discovery of such a beautiful and profound art, restricted to a few specialists, aroused a strong desire in me to do everything possible to spread its appreciation and to find young people who would dedicate themselves along with me to its revival as a factor in the cultural renaissance in India." Bharata natyam was regarded as opprobrious by the polite society and shunned along with devadasis who were the practitioners of this art form. Those were the days when even singing was taboo for women who were not devadasis.

Rukmani Devi began a frantic search for gurus. She was introduced to Gowri Amma, perhaps the greatest dancer of her time, who served the Lord at Kapaleeswarar Temple, Mylapore, Madras, and Pandanalluvar Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai who epitomized the glory of the Tanjavur tradition. She braved fierce opposition to a high-

caste lady's stooping to learn the trade of the devadasis.

As to the artform, Rukmani Devi would say, "It was almost extinct. I discovered that dance and dancers were in a very sorry state. What I wanted to prove was that what was wrong was not the dance itself but the circumstances surrounding it."

In 1935 she gave a dance recital before the delegates to the international convention of the Theosophical Society at Adyar. It was a thundering success. Dr. James H. Cousins, an eminent Theosophist, was so impressed that he mooted the idea of starting an organization to promote the art. Kalakshetra was born.

### The Principles of Kalakshetra

Rukmani Devi had definite views about her art center. She intended: 1) to emphasize the essential unity of all art and to work for the recognition of arts as vital to individual, national, religious and international growth; 2) to achieve these goals, students were to be trained in the arts through "the medium of sympathetic contact of master and pupil, in a gurukula atmosphere of intimate relationship;" 3) to impart an all-around education to prevent an "ivory tower" existence.

The Arts Academy (Kalakshetra) was founded on January 6, 1936, with Rukmani Devi as its head and moving spirit in the spacious ground of the Theosophical Society. In the midst of the mango grove arose little thatched colleges, each a classroom, and a small thatched theater for performances.

Rukmani Devi assembled the greatest dancers, musicians and singers of her time.

What a galaxy of talents peopled that world! There were Anbu Panickar and Chandu Panickar to teach Kathakalai; Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai, Chokalingam Pillai, Dandayudhapani Pillai, Karaikkal Saradambal and Gowri Ammal to teach bharata natyam; Veena Krishnamachariat, Tiger Varadachariar, Mudicondan Venkatrama Iyer, Papanasam Sivan, Kalidas Neelakanta Iyer and Mysore Vasudevachar to teach and create resplendent music. Also Karaikudi Sambasiva Iyer and the legendary Veena Vidwan Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal of Gottuvadyam fame. They came from different lines, enriching Kalakshetra and acquiring enriching experience themselves.

### A Meeting of East and West

Rukmani Devi drew choreographic inspiration from Western and Eastern ballet presentations, but it was essentially her own artistic and aesthetic sensibility which enabled her to give shape to the new presentational approach. She employed a variety of adavus, dance steps, using the body at different angles and not repeating a particular movement in a sequence. "Grace with precision" were her watchwords.

Rukmani Devi took meticulous care about stage lighting. She sought help from experts of European theatre and designed the lighting system to suit the Indian stage. With the help of artists, painters and sculptors, she designed a comfortable costume pattern for bharata natyam. Costumes and ornaments were totally different for each production. Kalakshetra has always boasted an international student body. Sarada Hoffman, Rukmani Devi's senior-most pupil from the very early years and now part of the staff, told Hinduism Today, "The foreigners do not tend to compromise or Westernize bharata natyam as we Indians do. For one thing, they are not dazzled by the West. They yearn for peace and inner joy. Race is no barrier provided the ethos that has flowered into bharata natyam is properly understood. Of course, Hindus from abroad-Kali from California, for instance-are entirely at home."

Rukmani produced over 35 full-length dance-dramas based on traditional and folk tales. Many of them were revived from the Bhagavata Mela traditions of Mellattur in Tanjavur District or were Kuravanjis-the traditional dance enactments of Tamil Nadu. Before she choreographed these ballets, the story, the script, music and costumes of a particular ballet-usually in Telugu, Sanskrit or Tamil-were meticulously researched.

The Dhananjayans said, "With her infinite capacity for taking pains, her legendary penchant for thoroughness and her singular ability to carry a task to the minutest detail, she had organized and left the production directions, the music and the choreography in such a clean and foolproof condition that any set of sincere artists can produce them with the touch and effect which she had intended."

### Government of India Assistance

According to Mr. S. Rajaram, the present principal, the Government of India is granting the institution a much-needed US\$2.4 million spread over a period of five years. It will be used to bring staff salaries up to par with other institutions and to build classrooms and teacher accommodations. "Nothing fancy," he clarifies, "something Indian in style, but entailing minimal maintenance." The library and museum will be expanded, and the ancillary arts, weaving, kalamkari printing and painting strengthened. "If this is done, then Kalakshetra will blossom again" asserts the former President of India, R. Venkataraman, its chief patron. While reported as a "government takeover," Rajaram told Hinduism Today that such concerns are misplaced, "There will not be any attempts on the part of the government to either alter the character of the institution or dilute its cherished values." India is richer for Kalakshetra, the fascinating child of a great visionary with an immortal longing, who dreamt a grand dream, then danced it into reality. n

Address: Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts, Thiruvaniyour, Madras, 600 041, India.  
Students Speak On Kalakshetra

This is the best place for most Indian Art forms, especially bharata natyam. There is a purity of art and divinity.

Shrukti Bhat, 4th year

St. Louis, Missouri, USA

For two years I cried and prayed to Krishna to help me study in Kalakshetra. He answered my plea. My dream is to found a school of bharata natyam in Almaty, the capital of Kazakhstan. I want to write a book on Rukmani Devi.

Akmaral Kainazavova, 1st year

Kazakhstan, former Soviet Union

When Sita appears in a Kalakshetra performance, you see Sita. There is more than what appears to your eyes. That extra something is always sensed, something that lifts us up.

S.V. Annapoorna, India

It is a handicap to begin with, to be a non-Hindu. In order to fully convey the themes, you must first study about Gods and Goddesses. But it is not something one can't surmount with effort. My aim is to perform and teach the classical Indian dance that I adore in the USA.

Bevin Jill Wilson, 27, Second Year

Cape Cod, Massachusetts, USA

This place not only makes you a good artist. Your character is developed and molded. A sense of respect for elders is instilled. I love this school so much I ached to be back here even during summer vacation. Brinda Nanavathy, Sixth Year

Gujarat, India

I was only eight when I saw Rukmani Devi at Bangalore. Her stage presence had the dignity and beauty of a Tanjavur painting, a feast for the eyes. Rukmani Devi has influenced an entire generation of dancers.

Sudharani Raghupathy,

Noted Danseuse, India