

KALAKSHETRA

- Smt. Chandrabhanu

Kalakshetra, originally named "The International Academy of Arts", was the brainchild of the legendary danseuse Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale. This pioneering institution for classical dance, music and other fine arts and crafts was established in 1936, after the extraordinary success of Rukmini's first performance of Bharatnatyam at the Theosophical society, in Adavyar, Madras. Encouraged by her husband Dr. George Arundale, a renowned theosophist, and other members of the Theosophical Society, Rukmini Devi started the Academy in the grounds of the society. The Academy was set up with the purpose of promoting the ancient dance form and other fine arts and to culturally revive the country which was losing its identity under British rule.

The name Kalakshetra was suggested by Pandit S. Subramanya Sastry, a Sanskrit Scholar and a member of the academy. His granddaughter, S. Sarada, Rukmini Devi's niece Radha and granddaughters of Kalki Krishnamurthy – Leelavati, A. Sarada and Anandi were among the first disciples of music. Dance and music were taught in the traditional "Gurukula" style under the great banyan tree in the grounds of the Theosophical society. The idyllic surroundings and the serene atmosphere inspired the students to learn our traditional art forms and imbibe our culture.

Many renowned nattuvanars and dancers of that period taught at the institute. Among them were Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, Muthukumara Pillai, and Chokkalingam Pillai. Karaikkal Saradambal Ammal, known for her nritta, polished the technique of the early students. Dandayudapani Pillai later joined the staff, as did Mylapore Gowri Ammal. These early teachers bequeathed many compositions and stylistic inputs to the institute which remain embedded in the Kalakshetra style even today. Ambu Pannikar, the great Kathakali exponent spent the last six years of his life at Kalakshetra, and taught Rukmini Devi several Kathakali movements. After his death, Chandu Pannikar, joined the institute. His students Dhananjayan, Balagopalan, and Janardhanan became the early male dancers of the institute, and they became popular for their heroic roles in Kalakshetra's dance dramas.

Rukmini Devi personally trained the early students. She refined and classified the adavus, the basic dance steps, making them more elegant and beautiful and systematized the teaching methodology for the dance form she inherited. Kalakshetra became the first dance institute to establish a proper theoretical syllabus for dancers.

Rukmini Devi had a great passion for music. For her, the dance simply gave a visual shape to music. She invited several great musicians to Kalakshetra. She created such a wonderful atmosphere in the campus that many doyens of carnatic music like Tiger

Varadachariar, his brother Veena Krishnamurthy Sastrigal and several others voluntarily served the institute and contributed substantially to its growth. Special mention should be made about Papanasam Sivan, who taught music at the Beasant School. He sang for Rukmini Devi's performances, breaking caste barriers for dance accompanists. Rukmini Devi gave legitimacy, dignity and a spiritual dimension to the dance form which had lost respect in the society of that time.

Tiger Varadachariar became Principal of Kalakshetra in 1944, when the Sangita Sironmani course was begun in the institute. Eminent musicians like Veena Sambasiva Iyer, Budalur Krishnamurthy Sastrigal, Mysore Vasudevachar, Papanasam Sivan and M.D.Ramanathan, student of Tiger, served as Principals in the successive years.

Kalaksheta's reputation rests on its dance dramas, meticulously choreographed by Rukmini Devi. The music for the dance dramas is the living legacy of the musicians who came to the institute. Rukmini Devi choreographed her first dramas kuttrala Kuravanji, to the music of Veena Krishnamachariar. Its success inspired her to choreograph Kalidasa's Kumara Sambhavam in 1947, for which Tiger Varadachariar composed the music. Papanasam Sivan scored Andal Charitram, Gita Govindam, Abhignana Shakuntalam, Kannapar Kuravanji and others. Mysore Vasudevachariar came to Kalakshetra in 1953 with his grandson Rajaram. He composed the music for the six-part Valmiki Ramayana until his death, after which Rajaram took over. For Rukmini Devi, these musicians provided the backbone on which she built her productions. The Splendour and grandeur of the dance dramas have to be seen to be believed.

Rukmini Devi devoted all her life to the institution that she created, funding it through her own resources and through the donations of friends and well-wishers. She nurtured the academy through many difficulties, supported by her friends and by a group of devoted and committed workers who gathered around her, such as Sankara Menon, Padmasini, Kamala Trilokekar, M.D.Mani, Sharada Hoffman and many others.

Over the years, encouraged by her husband, Dr.George Arundale, Rukmini Devi acquired land in the village of Tiruvanmiyur, a short distance away from the Theosophical Society. In 1951, a sapling of the great banyan tree in the Theosophical Society's grounds was planted at Tiruvanmiyur. The new campus was consolidated in the years that followed until it covered one hundred acres beside the sea. Gradually, other trees were planted on the sandy stretches of land. Kalakshetra moved to its new campus in the 1960s. Despite an acute shortage of funds, Rukmini Devi managed to build simple classrooms and hostels to continue her life's work. Each classroom, each tree that was planted was the measure of her determination to make her institution grow, in the face of many difficulties.

Along with music and dance, Rukmini Devi was deeply involved in the revival of ancient crafts. With the help of the legendary Kamal Chattopadhyay, she established the

weaving centre at Kalakshetra, which is still active. She also set up the Kalamkari printing and research centre, which helped in resuscitating this dying art.

Her interest in architecture made her build an auditorium for music and dance. This magnificent theatre was built according to the specifications laid down in Bharata's Natyasastra. It was constructed in the Koothambalam style of Kerala and named Bharata Kalakshetra Auditorium. This was inaugurated in 1985. Kalakshetra's Annual Festival of dance dramas and music concerts is held in this prestigious hall. Rukmini Devi composed and produced over thirty dance dramas, based on traditional forms, which have retained their freshness and beauty even sixty years after some of them were created. They continue to enthrall the audience each time they are performed.

After Rukmini Devi's demise in 1986, Dr. Sankara Menon, took over as Director of Kalakshetra. In 1993, the institute was taken over by the Government of India and deemed it as an institute of national importance. Since April 2005, Leela Samson, a leading performer of Kalakshetra style, has been heading the institute.

Over the years, Kalakshetra has produced many great musicians, musicologists and dancers of India. The alumni includes Yamini Krishnauthy, Kamala Lakshman, Dhananjayans, Leela Samson, Alarmel Valli, Adyar Lakshmanan, S.R. Janakiraman, Bhagavatula Seetarama Sarma and the list goes endless.

The greatest tribute to Rukmini Devi is the manner in which the dance she brought out of the shadows has flourished and grown. Rukmini Devi's legacy continues through Kalakshetra and its students who serve as the torch bearers of her great vision.

