



## Review : 26 December 2009

Inauguration...



Here they are...people for whom dance mattered! The 2009 Natya Kala Conference raised curtains for yet another edition titled "Dance Matter!" Dancers, musicians and connoisseurs congregated at their favourite venue Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, decked beautifully like a temple of dance!

Bringing the doyens to the fore...

Y Prabhu, Secretary, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, while welcoming the gathering went down memory lane to way back in 1981 when the summit started, where the dancing doyens like Dr Padma Subrahmanyam, Lakshmi Vishwanathan, CV Chandrashekhar, Dr Kanak Rele, Dr Sonal Mansingh, Dhananjayan, Chitra Vishweswaran, Kalanidhi Narayanan, Anita Ratnam, Leela Samson, MV Narasimhacharya and Bharathi Shivaji convened the show year after year to make it a perennial river of dance and related issues. Reintroducing the present convenor, Dr Ananda Shankar Jayant, who convened the NKC 2008 with a compelling theme titled "Ramayana in Performing Arts," Mr Prabhu extolled Ananda for bringing freshness to the annual dance ritual—for this year it is called "Dance Matters"...and he let the ball rolling...

Delving in the kaleidoscopic matters of dance

Convenor, Dr Ananda Shankar Jayant, addressed the gathering by throwing light inwards... beginning with why dance matters to her as both a personal and a professional facet in life. Drawing from her experience of convening "Ramayana in Performing Arts" in 2008, Ananda extended her approach by creating a matrix in the present league bringing in every aspect of dance and the supporting concerns of dancers, musicians, technicians, critics and a host of others from across the globe as presenters and performers. The conference took off on a promising note by unfolding the hitherto unexplored issues on dance.

Such a long journey...

Jayant Kastuar, Secretary, Sangeet Natak Akademi, followed up with a keynote address. Interestingly this dancer/administrator, who participated in the conference way back in 1982 as a presenter, marvelled at the way the conference has evolved through the years. Speaking on "Dance Matters," Jayant harked back to dance in India and their classicism as classical forms and more... of legendary maestros and dancers who took dance from the temples and beyond... and today how it still is awe-inspiring to see dancers living passionately from performance to performance—for only dance matters to them!!

## Where have we come... where do we go...

Dance commentator, critic and historian, Dr Sunil Kothari, brings forth hidden gems from his Pandora's box of pictures, docu dramas and films. Those rarest of rare pictures and recordings included Balasaraswati's abhinaya and an elderly Rukmini Devi teaching under the famous banyan tree! One was awed to see the picture of young Rukmini in a ballet gown! More came from the documentaries of Kalakshetra dance dramas and the rituals of arangetrams. From Uday Shankar's photo archives to much more, Dr Kothari simply took the audience through a passage of yesteryear dancers, especially the intellectual dancers who paved the way for dance to evolve through the generations. Most compelling was the documentary of Chandralekha's commentary on dance, body and tantra, which sowed the seeds of interpreting ancient art and its timelessness for the modern day dancer...and, importantly, her contemporary views on understanding abstraction in dance. Sunil, sums it up neatly... where do we go from here?!



## Joy in geometry



Talking of the 'Kinetics of Kitappa's Choreography,' Hari Krishnan and Srividhya Natarajan, ace Bharatanatyam dancers from Canada, owed it to their guru Kitappa who visualized dance for a proscenium stage. Thus, the guru artistically extended the choreography for complete coverage of the stage. The duo rhythmically took over to depict the same and showed the pure dance traversing across the theatre space with stretched limbs, making a plethora of flowery motifs. "...in these complexities of rhythmic patterns, we seek harmony and balance—all in a controlled power." Indeed, the dancers seemed to have completely drawn themselves into the joyous spaces of sacred geometry!

## Realizing those moments of truth!

Priyadarsini Govind takes an inward journey into dance and discovers "truth in the beauty and spirituality of art form." Her choreographies spoke volumes of the same while dancing to the vibrant *Kaliya Mardhanam* and the intoxicating energies of *Saptamatreka*. Priyadarsini simply depicted this process of seeking beauty through dance!  
- Pratima Sagar



## Ravishing rangs...

All invitees were chic and elegant at the inauguration of the conference today. Red and purple were the colors of the day as Jayant Kastuar, Leela Venkataraman, Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam, Lakshmi Vishwanathan, and Narthaki Natraj were all decked in ethnic wear with these hues. Dr. Ananda Shankar Jayant looked elegant in a double-toned bottle green and red Kanchipuram sari with a stylish embroidered designer blouse. Anita Ratnam was dazzling in an East Asian-inspired maroon tunic and churidhar while Pratima Sagar stood out in a pale grey and turquoise double-toned Bagalpuri sari accessorized with antique silver jewelry.

Remember, gentlemen, there is no gender bias in looking chic! We, too, can be stylish!

- K.R.

## What they said...

"What do we expect from the conference? What can we do now in this era to maintain the authenticity of dance? But we also need to evolve and experiment. While we're here they will tell us about the past. From the past we have to build up the future. We saw Chandralekha's work and Rukmini Devi's work. They have done their own things. I think we have to take inspiring bits and pieces from them and build our new future", Jaykumar, Kalakshetra Dance Student.

"This is a great homecoming, and I usually don't miss it. Having danced for close to five decades, it doesn't mean that I know everything. Every time I come and listen to someone or watch someone dance, I realize that the more I see, the more I learn, and the less I know. Therefore, there are blanks filled and new avenues opening, and it is a great lesson learned each time. I look forward to the conference each time because it replenishes my interest in dance again and again. This is a beautiful gift of Chennai to all the artists who want to continue learning about their own art", Ratna Pappa Kumar, Senior Dancer & Teacher from Houston, U.S.A.

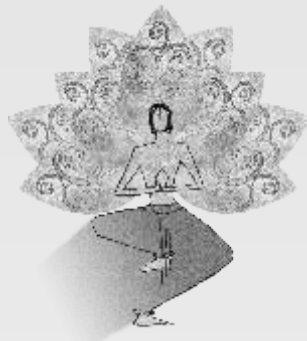
"I watched the presentation of [Dr. Sunil] Kothari, and the most impressive thing that I've always wanted dancers to have is the ability to sing and perform. So, the picture of Bamma singing should be inspiring for young dancers to develop art of that caliber. We must look upon dance as an integral part of dance which is not happening these days", Vijay Madhavan, Dancer & Teacher from Chennai.

"The conference should have new ideas about Bharathanatyam for it the best way for youngsters to keep healthy because it has yoga, meditation, and exercise besides the devotional aspect. There is too much media diversion for youngsters, and Bharathanatyam creates a new mode of life [for them]", J. Kannan, Former Civil Servant & Art Connoisseur.

- Kiran Rajagopalan

Coffee Conversations...

Coffee Conversations...



## Programme :

28th December 09  
 9.15 - 10.05 : The Expressive Body,  
 Sujata Mohapatra  
 10.10 - 11.00 : Essence of Abhinaya,  
 Lakshmi Vishwanathan  
 11.10 - 12.00 : Media and Dance,  
 Sadanand Menon, Ramnarayan, Anjana Rajan,  
 Chitra Mahesh, Anuradha Ananth  
 12.10 - 13.00 : Excerpts from new works,  
 Arangham Trust, Natya- STEM dance kampani,  
 Thiruchelvam, Samudra

### Did U Know

Rukmini Devi had insisted on including Kathakali training in the grooming of male Bharatanatyam dancers at Kalakshetra, since she believed that this would help strengthen their maleness while helping to edge out attributes of effeminacy.

From time immemorial, there have been two parallel schools of dance: Nattuva Mela and Natya Mela. The first with a devotional purpose is performed in temples by devadasis and the second intended for special occasions in temples such as festivals, rituals, ceremonies etc. for the benefit of pilgrims. Basically, their root is the same- Bharata's Natya Sastra. Nattuva Mela has developed into Bharatanatyam and Natya Mela into the Kuchipudi dance."

('The birth and growth of Kuchipudi dance' by Vempatti Chinna Satyam, Nartanam, July-Sept 2004)

The karanas such as sakatasyam, cakramandalam and gangavataranam which are highly acrobatic in nature are meant as exercise for the body to keep the dancer trim. It might also be due to the merging of acrobatics and the art of dance which has been natural during the course of history of dance in any part of the world.

('Bharatanatyam - Classical Dance of the Ancient Tamils: The Role of Dance Sculptures in Tamilnad' by Padma Subrahmanyam)

### Snippets

The first reference to devadasis in a literary work is in the Sivabhakthi Keerthanamala written by Ceraman Perumal Nayanar in the 8th century AD. Detailed descriptions of devadasis are seen in the literary works Unniyachi Charitam, Unnuneeli Sandesam, Kaunothara, Utharachandrika and Vaisika Thanthram written before fifteenth century. These books give evidence regarding the devadasi centers at Odanadu, Kandiyoor (south Kerala), Mathilakam, Kodungalloor, Trisoor, Chokiram (central Kerala), Pallikkunnu, Thirumaruthoor and Thrichambaram (north Kerala). Sivavilasom written by Damodara Chakyar and Suka Sandesam also contain references to the temple dances prevalent during those days.

(PJ Cherian, Essays on the Cultural Formation of Kerala)

The first substantive piece of writing on Kathakali is in French. Published in 1926, it extends to 96 pages and along with illustrations, gives a detailed description of a performance at Kottayam on January 14, 1916.

('Art at Stake' by Mohan Khokar, Illustrated Weekly of India, Dec 1 - 2, 1990)

While we know that people danced in Europe long before the Renaissance, the first detailed dance manuals that survive today were written in 1450 and 1455 in Italy. These manuals, and later manuals from France, England, and other European countries, give us a peek at what was a very important social activity in the Renaissance.

## Excerpts from the interviews

(for detailed interviews visit [www.natyakalaconference.com](http://www.natyakalaconference.com) and [www.narthaki.com](http://www.narthaki.com))

How relevant is it to perform erotic Padams and Javalis, (which were done in intimate surroundings), on a proscenium stage? Where does one draw the line?

When the traditional repertoire is the main substance of the margam based performance, the time-honoured order of repertoire, brings Javali, next to the Padams, to give a certain lighter note of enjoyment both for the performer and the viewer; as we all are aware, the Javalis are short lyrical, pieces, providing lilted joy that pervades through, with its its sringara- oriented content; the dance-space of the past has now shifted to the proscenium stage; viewing the content of the Javali and delivering the same to the spectator with subtlety and dignity are the twin responsibility of the dancer and the viewer; with a total grip over the nuances and the boundaries of fulfillment of the sentiment involved, it is possible for the individual dancer to bring forth, in right proportion, the required effect, keeping in mind the responsibility of doing or undoing the levels of dignity of the dance-form. These levels evolve out of the basic training of the dancer and her enlarged vision of the aspects of abhinaya delineation; based on these points, the scope lies in the hands of the dancer to enliven the composition suitably. Through her own skill, she can handle an erotic lyric, either to the extreme or tame it to suit the environment, thereby adding a personal touch to it. Whether it is Javali, or Padam, the technique makes all the difference; hence presenting a Javali, depends only on how and how much is expressed. If art is regarded as an extension of life's experience, there is certainly relevance to a Javali on a proscenium stage.



Nandini Ramani



V P Dhananjayan

As more male dancers are becoming solo artistes, what do you think it means to "dance like a man" in Bharatanatyam?

Man or woman, everyone wants to be a soloist irrespective of their actual capacity to hold an audience as a soloist. It requires one to be endowed with an extra dimension of performing ability. Not all have it. One should try to realize one's own ability and try to divest their energy primarily to hold Natya as profession. Not many male dancers are successful as soloists, and therefore resort to group dancing to make their career more successful economically. Effeminate male dancers are not acceptable to the connoisseurs of Bharatanatyam. Bharatanatyam with masculine vigor and sensitive abhinaya are what I mean by "dance like man."

How has your training in Kathakali enhanced your performance of Bharatanatyam? What should young dancers keep in mind if they choose to learn more than one style of dance?

Kathakali training certainly makes a man dance like man, and with the body, mental, and spiritual discipline that we get from Kathakali training, one gets completeness. My success as a Bharatanatyam performer is my judicious amalgamation of both styles. Certain combination of styles gel well, but some do not. So, one must be very cautious of learning more than one style.

What are the challenges of maintaining a large archive like the Mohan Khokar Dance Collection in India? What can be done so that valuable collections are preserved for future generations?

The challenges are just too many for an individual. Being shy, honest, frank and true to the art are all bad combinations in India! Yet, the gods have been very kind. Somehow we have managed. The Mohan Khokar Dance Collection (MKDC) is the painstaking work of my father Mohan Khokar, who diligently collected and built it for over 70 years, and I have done all that could be done to save it and keep it intact for the last 30 years. My mother too suffered a lot for it. We three have put all of our earnings and a lifetime's work into it.

It is now beyond the ability of one individual, no matter how strong, gifted, or committed. It needs urgent institutional support. Having tried donating it to many national institutions, I still have not found the collection a proper home. Donations are not taken seriously in India. There is no accountability. The MKDC contains not just archival material but artifacts, costumes, masks, and crafts. Gurus from over three generations have given us letters, pictures, and books. Many dance legends have gifted personal effects. We cannot now physically accommodate all these things. It cannot fit into any existing institution; an institution needs to be built around it.

I did not want to create an institution because my best years would have gone into just managing that and not doing real field work for books and biographies. Giving it away to a deserving institution has its pitfalls because they may not have the same sense of commitment to dance history. The security and safety and proper use of historical materials is paramount. Keeping the collection and augmenting it, is a perennial challenge and I'm doing my best to save it from many elements for future generations.

The MKDC is in dire need of conservation, preservation and computerization so that students, Ph.D researchers, new critics, and writers can benefit. Digitization would help reach the collection to more people now that we have great technology at our command. The MKDC is the nation's wealth.



Ashish Mohan Khokar



## Visualizing Kuchipudi

Dr Anuradha Jonnalagadda, traces the legacy of Vempati Chinna Satyam and his innumerable choreographic creations that distinctly stand as Guru Vempati Style!