

Balasaraswati's Many - Splendoured Genius

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When Balasaraswati, the doyen of Bharatanatyam, passed away on February 9, 1984 at the age of 66, the world of Indian dance lost not only a veteran dancer, but an epoch-maker. Critics and connoisseurs of the dance traditions of India affirmed that there was none like her who had so boldly and unostentatiously kept up the age-old traditions of Bharatanatyam. Reviewers and dance lovers, students and impresarios in the West called her “unparalleled” and bowed to this creative genius in humble obeisance¹. It was she that opened up the infinite possibilities of this art and showed to the public what a creative artist like Balasaraswati could do with it ! “Robust, vital, with passionate expressive eyes and a mobile face,” writes a critic who saw her in the early days of her career, “Balasaraswati is fascinating like a fearless fawn and as seductive as a Mathura Mithuna.”²

T. Balasaraswati³, belonged to a family of temple dancers and musicians and had a long lineage of artists who had earlier adorned royal courts. Her ancestor, Papammal by name, was a court dancer in the Tanjavur court of the Nayaka kings. Women of successive generations richly contributed to the arts of dance and music ever since. Bala's (she was called so fondly both by the near and dear and



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even by those who would refer to her so if they had seen her dance !) great grandmother, Kamakshiammal also danced and sang in the Tanjavur court, whereas her great grandmother, Sundarammal was a musician of repute.

Bala's grandmother, the redoubtable Dhanammal, whose influence on Bala was pronounced by herself, wielded her Veena with aplomb. Bala was never tired of announcing and acknowledging Dhanam's adulatory status in the household as well as among her large company of friends and admirers.⁵ "Veena Dhanam was trained in the musical styles of Dikshitar and Syama Sastri," says Bala in her presidential speech given at the Music Academy, "it is her interpretation of their music which has been perpetuated through our family and her training which has influenced my interpretation of our pada repertoire".⁶ Bala's mother, Jayammal, was also a singer of great merit. She learnt songs mainly from her mother, but also from other singers like Subraya Iyer and one Baladas who was proficient in singing padams. Bala acknowledges her mother's "inspirational" singing prowess and how each word of the song was couched in "emotional vibrancy".

Though Dhanam's family claimed equal leanings towards dance and music for over three hundred years, music was the dominant art form practised and propagated during the last half a century. Dhanammal's house was a veritable beehive for music maestros. Her 'Friday concerts' invariably attracted the enlivened enthusiasm of, and innovative participation from well-known musicians of the day.

When Bala showed intelligent and innovative mimetic qualities of expressions and easy and flowing movements of hands, several friends of the family, especially Gauri Ammal, approached Dhanam to put Bala under the scrutiny of a dance teacher. The old lady fumed, frowned and snubbed them. This happened to, among others, Gauri Ammal, herself an excellent exponent of abhinaya and Kandappa Pillai, teacher of Gauri Ammal. At last Jayammal came to speak on behalf of her daughter and, after a long and excruciating scrutiny, gave her consent.⁷

The mantle of teaching dance to Bala fell on Kandappa Pillai, "a fine musician,"⁸ and was a direct descendant of the eldest of the brothers of the now renowned Tanjaore Quartet.⁹ Born in 1899, Kandappa was the son of Nellaiyappa Nattuvanar, and a descendent, through the female line, of Tanjavur Chinnaiah, the eldest of the Quartet. After completing his training as

nattuvanar, he joined Gauri Ammal's orchestra and along with Gauri, spent most of his time at Dhanammal's house. A stern disciplinarian and a gifted singer, he agreed to train Bala in the rigours of the traditional temple and court dance conditions. "Kandappa was an uncompromising purist and a perfectionist who never spared the rod"¹⁰. Bala asserts : "Every *adavu* of his

dance compositions fits perfectly to the *svaras*."¹¹



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If Kandappa's training was "severe, rigorous", in the area of dance, Bala's mother, Jayammal, took upon herself to train the young child in music. The morning sessions were devoted to dance and the evening ones to music. Bala paying glowing tributes to her mother's virtuosity, has a very revealing analysis of what her style of dance constitutes :

"She (her mother) taught me the close relationship of abhinaya to raga - contour," Bala wrote about her mother. Jayammal further opened up the key to Bala's successful synthesis of music and dance, when she instructed her daughter, saying : "your head, your body must move with the sangati, the gamaka and not just with the tala."¹²

According to Jayammal, each of the limbs must respond to each of the musical notes and the nuances therein, so that the rendering of dance would provide "visual music" and the singing would be "aural visuality." This is the key to Bala's later-day success. She could see the inner rhythm of the poetic images and transform them, through her dance, into a sequence of visual images. She also acknowledges her debt to the veteran abhinaya exponent, Mylapore Gauri Amma : "The initial inspiration within me to take up dancing came from seeing a performance of Gauri Ammal when I was very young. If she had not brought the dance to such a stage of development, the combination of music and dance that I have attempted to realize would not have been possible."¹³



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Balasaraswati acknowledges other influences as well. Her family environment itself was a silent instructor in the ways of public and private behavioural patterns. Trained ladies within the family, like Radhamma, who took it upon themselves to train the child in languages - especially Telugu, Tamil and Sanskrit.

Direct learning from competent teachers and instructors was aided by supportive environment at home. Musicians who thronged Dhanam's house for engaging exchanges on musical practices like Dharmapuri Subbarayan, the famous Javali-writer, Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, the

leader of the music world and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar frequented the house and young Bala was influenced by their serious intent and healthy debate. And everyone would stop by and make kind enquiries about Bala's newly - acquired skills.

It is obvious that Bala's strong desire to be a dancer, her grand-mother's eloquent yearning for perfection and discipline, her mother's insistence on synthesizing the internal and external rhythm had synchronized with the conducive atmosphere at home for acquiring linguistic skills of a high order, the stewardship of the guru and guidance from the friends of the family - all these aided Bala to grow into an able performing artist very early in her life.

Bala's debut as a dancer took place in the Ammanakshi temple in Kanchipuram when she was seven years old. Ammanakshi, the presiding deity of the temple, promised to remain at Kanchipuram obliging the devotees' desire to be in their midst since they were put to inconvenience by shuttling every year from her native shrine at Puttur to her temporary abode at

Kanchipuram. It was only natural that Bala had the 'arangetram' at this temple, for the Goddess was the presiding deity of musical exuberance.

Several well-known musicians who were friends of the family attended the debut performance and congratulated "Dhanammal's grand-daughter" for her well-trained abilities and intuitive improvisations. One such was Naina Pillai whose favourable comments on Bala's debut soon led to her performance in Madras. Narayana Menon describes the event vividly¹⁴ :



In some respects her professional debut can be said to have taken place in Madras a little later. Some of the greatest musicians and connoisseurs of the dance were present on the occasion. They included Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Pakkiri Pillai (the great Karnatic Vidwan), Tanjaore Vaidyanatha Iyer

(the guru of Palghat Mani Iyer), Azhakanampi Pillai, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer, Ramanaiah Chettiar. The programme opened with an *Alarippu* in *Tisram*. Then followed the *Kalyani Jatiswaram* and the *Sabdam*, 'Vennuda'. The *varnam* was the *Todi Varnam*, *Danike*, which Balasaraswati also sang. Several *padams* followed including *Sunthasepu* in *Sankarabharanam*, *Ella Arumaihalum* in *Todi*; *Niddiranjil* in *Pantuvrali*, *Bala vinave* in *Kambhodi*.

The Madras performance gave evidence to Bala's learning process initiated by Dhanammal and Jayammal, in which several components of learning had been unconsciously merged into an artistic amalgam. This process continued whenever Bala felt that there was someone, with expertise and artistic integrity to guide her.

As Bala later admitted, she had kept herself open to learn from anyone of "artistic integrity" to add and embellish the thorough training she had had from her family and the guru. One lady living with them in the house taught her to explore the entire emotional range of *sahitya* using only facial

expression, without the aid of arms, hands; with or without music. This mimetic expressiveness later on helped Bala to elaborate the *sattvika*, especially in the *abhinaya* of the *padas*. She was also indebted to Chinnaiah Naidu who taught her during one stage in her career to develop improvisation by singing short phrases and, with few clues, asked her which *nayika* would fit into the description.



Bala and Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry

In her thirties, she also studied with the Kuchipudi maestro, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry, who was a well-known exponent of *sattvika*. As Bala herself acknowledges :

Laxminarayana Sastry opened great new vistas for me, especially in *varnam* improvisation. He shared his immense knowledge, and in a very

real sense, gave me the confidence to attempt those things I do today.¹⁵

In fact, Bala had the benefit of learning “soulful *padams*” from her grandmother and from Gauri Amma. Bala explained later in her interview given to Pattabhiraman and Anandhi Ramachandran :¹⁶

She (Bala) studied later with Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastri to gain new insights into *abhinaya*. Sastri was an expert in the interpretation of *padams*. He spoke his own idiom. He would ask Bala : “Can you do this *varnam*? How would you cast its horoscope ?” Tiruppambaram Swaminatha Pillai was ‘not greatly impressed by Sastri’s musical abilities, but Bala was quick to appreciate his creative imagination. She tells us how Sastri commanded her to cast the horoscope of a Todi *Varnam* one day. I did it without any repetitions. He responded by asking me to give it up and stick to *padams* ! “They are your family heritage,” he said, “and with *someone* like your mother singing *padams*, you can have the whole world in your hands.”¹⁷

Sastri would arrive early mornings, covered in a green shawl. He would spend hours teaching Bala. He taught her songs from Bhamakalapam and many other items.

Very soon Bala equipped herself with an extraordinary range of *padams*, *javalis*, *varnams* and *sabdams* - so wide a range that no contemporary dancer could ever dream of equipping herself. To Bala's advantage, the whole musical repertoire of three generations of family member-singers stood handy by her side. Her mother's singing abilities, Kandappan's composing capabilities and Bala's interpretative genius completed the fulsomeness. The rest is history.

Around the same time, she was given a chance to perform at the Music Academy which was, in a way, a recognition of her perfect abilities to give a full performance. From 1933, Bala adorned the stage of the Academy and continued to do so for four decades later and that had become her testing ground for new innovations. Dr. V. Raghavan¹⁸, the eminent scholar and at that time Secretary of the Academy was behind the continued insistence that Bala's innovative performances must be showcased on the Academy's stage.

Until mid-30's Bala had a successful and busy schedule of performances. Besides performances in Madras, she was introduced to northern audiences. It was a chance happening when Uday Shankar and his impresario friend, Haren Ghosh were in Madras, they showed interest in seeing Bala's performance. A show for them was arranged. Uday Shankar was utterly non-plussed looking at the creative



Uday Shankar and Balasaraswati

ingenuity of Bala and he and Haren Ghosh together arranged her performances at important artistic centres in the north. Thus Bala was able to give a concert in Varanasi to which Rabindranath Tagore was invited. Tagore was so taken in by Bala's creativity that he soon arranged her programme at Shanti Niketan.

In 1935, Bala also performed at Calcutta. Satyajit Ray, who later made a film on Bala, remembered the occasion¹⁹ :

"A tall girl with long limbs and a round face doing a kind of dance I had never seen before ... at the now-vanished Senate Hall in Calcutta. The year was 1935 and the occasion was the All Bengal Music Conference. I remember the applause that greeted Balasaraswati's first performance - and the first performance ever of Bharatanatyam - in Calcutta. A friend of the family was the impresario Haren Ghosh. It was Haren who told us about Bharatanatyam, and the young South Indian dancer who was supposed to excel in it."

Uday Shankar invited both Bala and Kandappa to join him in his forthcoming global tour. But Jayammal put her foot down on the proposal for she felt that Uday Shankar's was a group dance and our dance wouldn't fit into theirs. "Perhaps we could make money, but our art would be spoiled,"²⁰ she said.

The last years of 1930's and the early forties were dog years in the life of Balasaraswathi. Her health failed. She could not dance. Young competitors entered the field. Bala became heavy. Meanwhile Kandappan unexpectedly left Bala, accepting the invitation of Uday Shankar to join him at Almora. Kandappan left for Almora in 1938 and this affected Bala mentally and emotionally. Kandappan, however, did not return to Bala's orchestra. He died at Almora in 1941. During this period of turmoil, Dr. Raghavan continued to be a great source of strength to Bala. Bala, who was continuously performing at the Music Academy since 1933, started teaching in the school established at the Academy (1953). In 1943 Bala gave birth to her only daughter Lakshmi. Her health problems continued.

But by the turn of the year 1950, Bala settled down emotionally. She was now on the heavier side, but found her agility back. The early years of the decade were a turning point in Bala's life. The teaching at Madras Music Academy was formalised and the Music and Dance school started classes on a regular basis. The school flourished and imparted the traditional



Bala with her Orchestra : T. Jayammal, K. Sarojini, Ellappa Pillai and Radhakrishna Naidu
(Music Academy, 1958)

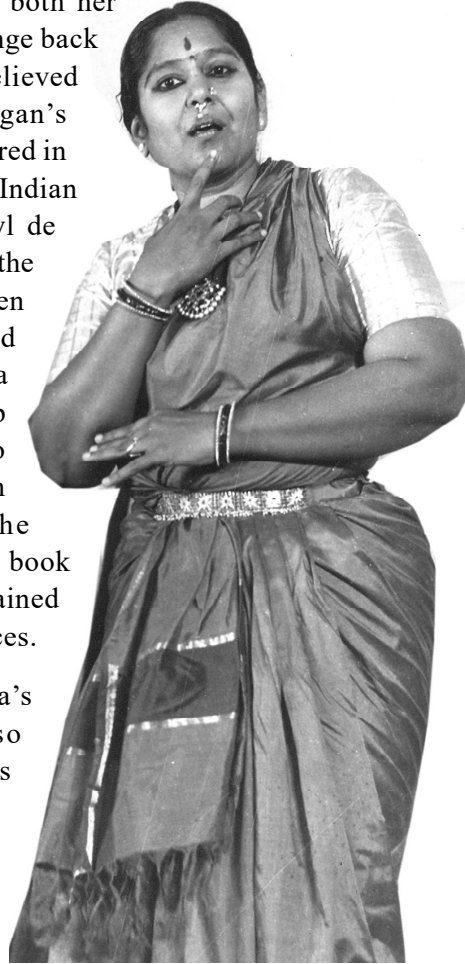
Bharatanatyam style of the Tanjavur *bani*, to which she proudly belonged. Ganeshan, Late Kandappan's son joined the orchestra. He was in charge of the students' training in *adavus*, while Bala was incharge of abhinaya training. As V. Raghavan later complimented²¹ :

The school which Srimati T. Balasarasvati (sic.) has been conducting for the past few years under the patronage of and in the premises of the Academy has recently been put on an organised basis with a Managing Committee There are ten students now in different stages of training. There is, besides, an American student, Indrani, who holds a scholarship under the Ford Foundation and is in the second year of training now

Care is taken to inculcate the essential basic attitudes and their correctness which are all now being gradually forgotten. Srimati Balasarasvati is assisted by Sri K. Ganesan, son of her late teacher, Sri Kandappa Pillai.

By this time Bala had regained both her mental and physical prowess to plunge back into active work. She sincerely believed that it was all due to Lord Murugan's blessings.²² Perhaps the Lord appeared in the guise of a Dutch poetess and an Indian dancer. The Dutch poet was Beryl de Zoete, a researcher and Ram Gopal, the Bharatanatyam dancer who was then in New Delhi. Beryl, who studied Balinese dance earlier, came to India to study Indian dance. With the help of Ram Gopal, she came down to South to study the South Indian dance traditions - especially the language of gestures. She wrote a book called *The Other Mind*, which contained fascinating accounts on Indian dances.

While in Madras, they saw Bala's performances. Zoete was so fascinated and thrilled by Bala's exposition of abhinaya that she, with the support of Ram Gopal, quickly arranged Bala's programmes in New Delhi. Her performances in Delhi in the early fifties were considered a treat. She was hailed as the best exponent of the Indian dance. Describing this transitory period in her life, G. Venkatachalam, a prominent art critic, especially of the pre-Independent India's art scenario, wrote in his book, *Dance in India*:²³



The tragedies of life haven't spared her youth or genius and her own irrepressible nature and inborn impulses have played havoc with her art. Being a girl of moods, she has bright and sunny moments as well as gloomy and depressing periods. Like all sensitive people she has her crucifixion as well as her resurrection, her vale of tears as well as her peak of happiness.

From the time she had shed her unhappy years behind, there was no going back. Her busy schedule of performances took her far and wide and she soon became an epitome of the best of classical creativity in India.

Her expressive *netrabhinaya*, her easy flowing hand gestures and, above all, her unperturbed, confident, equipoised stage presence earned critical appreciation and official recognition.

Balasaraswathi received the Sangeet Natak Award in 1955. The Akademi's citation described her as a foremost exponent of the Bharata Natyam style of dancing. Extolling Bala's expertise in abhinayam, it says that "she is a creative artist of the highest order, and has a large repertoire of rare collections. Her performances command great appreciation."²⁴



Balasaraswati receiving *Sangeet Natak Akademi Award*, 1955

From March 30 to April 7, 1958, the Sangeet Natak Akademi conducted an All India Dance Festival at New Delhi in which Balasaraswati's Bharatanatyam and Guru Kunchu Kurup's Kathakali were "outstanding items," that danced into the hearts of the New Delhi aficionados. Smt. Bala's dancing on the occasion, writes Suresh Awasthi, "was marked by exactness of movements, precision of gestures and a masterly control of *abhinaya - mudras*—which displayed something of the spirit of classical sculpture."²⁵ An interesting feature, apart from the performances, was the seminars in which scholars of various dance styles presented papers. Bala, as an ardent student of Bharatanatyam and as a person with strong views on the use of *sringara* in Bharatanatyam, questioned another great exponent, Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale who presented a paper. In that paper Rukmini Devi emphasized the spiritual element in Bharatanatyam and a dancer must eliminate the overtly Sringara Padams. Bala questioned her as to the validity of eschewing of certain songs arbitrarily (on the basis of they being branded as *Sringara-oriented*).²⁶

In 1961 Bala was invited to attend the East-West conference at Tokyo, Japan. After much vacillation and uncertainty and at the instance of loving and understanding admirers like Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, she finally participated in the conference and danced during the festival - the first time she did outside India. She was 43 years old, an age when several dancers would have called it a day !! But she danced with confidence. Lord Harewood, a cousin of Queen Elizabeth II and an authority on Ballet, praised Bala's performance during the Festival and felt that "it was nothing short of revelation."²⁷

In 1961 I was in Japan for the first (and only) time in my life for what promised to be an exciting festival, an East-West encounter

By light years the most interesting and enthralling I saw was a dance recital ... from Balasaraswati.

She walked on as if she were coming into a room, made herself comfortable, and, until she was performing, did not behave as if she were visible at all. In effect, she wasn't. But once she started, audience submission was complete. There was the arrogance of the great performer and the humility of the great artist; the brilliance of a virtuoso and the lyricism of a poet; the beauty of a young girl in love shown through the experience of a mature woman at the height of her performing powers. I was totally captivated and for days after could think of nothing but the exhilaration which the performance had engendered.

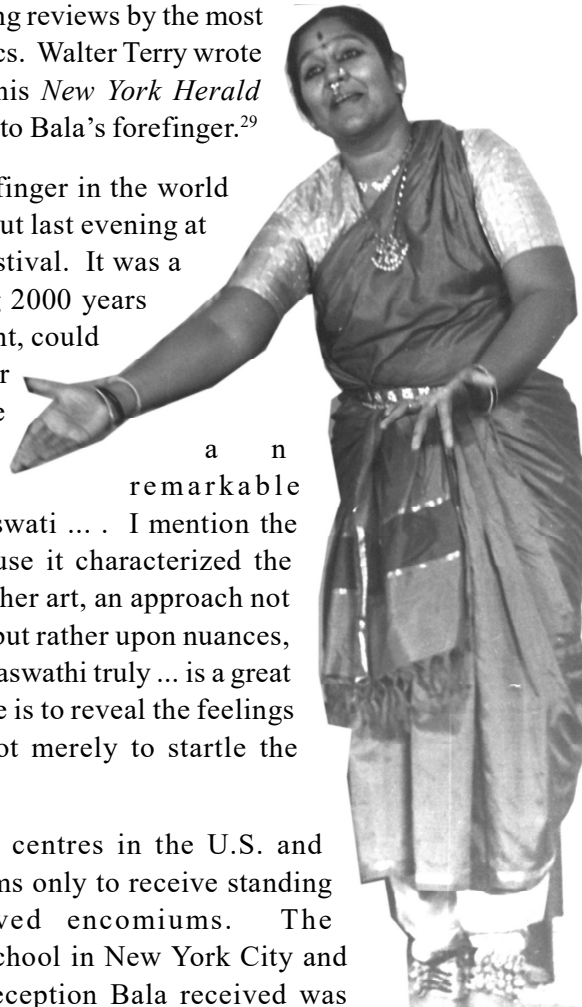
The year 1962 saw Bala making her first-ever trip to the U.S., to be often repeated frequently in the next two decades, sponsored by the Asia Society in New York. This sponsorship was intended to facilitate her to serve as an Artist-in-Residence at the Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. The trip was the beginning of a series of visits for Bala to serve as an Artist-in-Residence at many University centres. Every one of the visits was special by itself and earned for her new disciples and new friendships. This trip was particularly memorable because she gave lecture - demonstrations at sixteen centres all over the country and gave recitals. Her initial performance in the U.S. was at the Jacob's Pillow festival in Massachusetts organized by the famous dancing couple - Ted Shawn and Ruth St. Denis. The performance itself was widely appreciated and warmly greeted. Ted Shawn, the Director

of the Festival, came on to the stage at the end of the performance to thank Bala. He reminded his enthralled audience : "You are in the presence of greatness."²⁸

Similarly there were moving reviews by the most influential and respected critics. Walter Terry wrote a now - famous review for his *New York Herald Tribune*, calling our attention to Bala's forefinger.²⁹

"The most articulate forefinger in the world dance made its American debut last evening at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. It was a forefinger which, employing 2000 years of gestural dance development, could summon or dismiss, invite or caution, assure or tease, make an airy comment or project an indisputable command. This remarkable finger belonged to Balasaraswati I mention the forefinger specifically because it characterized the dancer's special approach to her art, an approach not based on physical virtuosity but rather upon nuances, shading subtleties Balasaraswathi truly ... is a great actress-dancer whose purpose is to reveal the feelings of Gods and of men and not merely to startle the beholder."

Bala moved on to other centres in the U.S. and performed or offered lec-dems only to receive standing ovation and well-deserved encomiums. The demonstration at Juilliard School in New York City and the touching and rousing reception Bala received was reported by Allen Hughes, the reviewer of *The New York Times*. Though for New York spectators South Indian dance was not new, he says, "until last week we had not seen Balasaraswati here, and she makes all the difference."³⁰ Hughes continues : "She had neither youth, beauty svelteness or slick theatricality to help her along. Her stage manner is anything but imperious; as she stands waiting to begin a dance, she is altogether unpossessing



But then the music begins, and she becomes Balaraswati.

Balasaraswati's particular genius may be in her extraordinary sense of rhythm and timing. Each phrase of dance or dance-pantomime seemed to be initiated almost as an after-thought, as something that had occurred to her on the spur of the moment. Yet each was so exquisitely adjusted to the music that it made one more aware of that music than he would have been otherwise Thus, incompletely comprehended though it was, Balasaraswati's art was full of esthetic records."

The year 1962 also gave an opportunity to many aspiring students to undergo training under Bala who felt that their dream had come through. One of the students so enlisted in Bala's class at Wesleyan was Luise Scripps. She heard of Balasaraswati's mastery of the Indian dance idiom earlier and came all the way from California to visit her. To her utter joy and bewilderment Bala enlisted her as a student. Their relationship continued all through Bala's life. It was due to the efforts of the Scripps³¹ - an institution called the American Society of Eastern Arts (ASEA) was established. This was to enable Bala to come to the U.S. and teach. Another enthusiast, Caroline Kay, came from New York to California to be a student in Bala's class.

The year also fondly remained in Bala's memory for the rich rewards she received. Besides overt public responses and critical appreciations, individuals who had made a name in the field of dance made it a point to see her performances and within the first few moments, got enamoured with it and looked forward to more and more experiences of the kind.

Before Bala left Madras for her U.S. trip in 1962, Martha Graham, the reputed dancer, wanted to see Bala's dance. A programme was arranged. Bala gave a ten-minute dance item and sought to know from her guest whether that was enough. Embarrassed, Graham asked her to continue. Bala danced for a full two hours when a completely involved Martha Graham requested her to go on at the bewilderment of officials who programmed her visit to Madras. According to reports in the special issue of *Sangeet Natak*, Martha Graham asked Bala, "How could you be hiding in this place while the rest of the world knows so little about you? I am going to carry you off."³² While leaving Ms. Graham promised she would receive her in the U.S. When she could not, she sent a bouquet to Bala and wished her well in the U.S.

In 1963 Bala was invited to attend the Edinburgh Festival. Lord Harewood, who was greatly impressed by her performance in Tokyo during the East-West Encounter in 1961, wanted her to be the centre of an "Indian Festival - within - a Festival at Edinburgh - and she agreed. A special stage with stone was arranged, (not a spring ballet floor as Bala wanted). The Edinburgh Festival was one of the high water marks of her relatively quiet, dignified career. She gave eight recitals - all of them to sold-out houses. She was certainly the star of the 1963 Festival, a year that had, among others, such celebrities as Yehudi Menuhin, Martha Graham, Isaac Stern, Guilini, Ionesco, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Michael Tippett, not to mention Indian artists like Ravi Shankar, Ali Akbar and Subbulakshmi. As Lord Harewood later reported, 'She arrived, rehearsed, performed and conquered !"³³ His assessment of Bala's dance art would probably sum up those of other such responses, especially those who are not India-born : "I knew Bala so little, and yet I feel I know her all my life. From the time I first saw her, she will affect all dance, all theatre, all performance that I am able to experience."³⁴

Balasaraswati toured the U.S. almost annually between 1962 and 1977. After the Edinburgh Festival and after the Scripps started their American Society for Eastern Arts, Bala visited the U.S. in 1965 (ASEA : Los Angeles), 1968 (again by ASEA) and later was in residence at several American institutions including Oakland, California (1970), Mills College Oakland and California Institute of the Arts (1972), Seattle, University of Washington (1974), Centre for World Music, Berkley, CA (1975), American Dance Festival, New London, Connecticut (along with Laxmi, her daughter; 1977), at Duke University, North Carolina (1978) and at Wesleyan University (1980 and 1981).

This long and impressive list might lead people to misconstrue the purpose of her frequent visits abroad. One reason was the growing popularity and understanding of Bharatanatyam all over the world which was, to a great extent, due to the untiring and relentless work Bala did in propagating and educating people about the art form. Secondly, the 'residency' arrangement fitted her temperament : only students deeply involved would register. Thirdly, that would also give her an opportunity to perform and explain the nuances of lyrics and the technique.

That each visit was a tremendous success and people eagerly waited for her next visit was nothing new in the case of Bala. Renee Renouf, a

correspondent who travelled each year to attend Bala's recitals all over the U.S. summarizes her feelings after a performance³⁵ : "Bala's concert reconfirmed the original impact and the impression of a great art and a superb exponent. For me to recite her virtues would run like a lesson in hysterical cliches and the necessity to do so seems quite extraneous.

The audience contained a number of professional dancers who were coming to Bala's art for the first time; some had worked in modern dance, others in classical ballet; each the writer spoke to was deeply stirred, the quality and nature of which left them all too aware how improvised speech can be at times to convey feeling. Every account - anecdotal or critical - which I have encountered at some point touches on this particular phenomenon of Bala's art."

Bala danced at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College in New London in 1977 and the audience were in tears when she danced to *Krishna nee begane* and Anna Kisselgoff reviewed Bala's performance of the song ecstatically : "The expressiveness of Balasaraswati's gestures, the depth of the emotions she registers and the concentration that pervades her figure - all go beyond entertainment to suggest quiet ecstacy" ³⁶

Renee Renouf, who reviewed several of Bala's performances, summed up the American response to Balasaraswati in telling terms. Though this review concerned her earlier visit to the U.S., this would apply to all her visits and emotionally relates her to her admirers³⁶ :

I do not speak as a solitary voice as I attempt to write this, following Balasaraswati's San Francisco concerts. Individuals seeing her in Los Angeles and Seattle travelled through fog and rain to see her local programmes. A band of devotees stood weeping as she boarded the plane which was to take her to her final concerts at the University of Hawaii, Honolulu. If what was witnessed here was identical to the response throughout her four-month, 40-concert trans-continental U.S. tour, arranged by New York's Asia Society, it is a triumphant vindication to those of us who firmly believe Americans are capable of discerning and responding to the special and unique in an artiste, even if the particulars of understanding - the intellectual and aesthetic refinements - may escape us.

“All this has been possible,” continues Renee Renouf, “because the impact of Bala’s dance recital on the spectator is so enlightened and emotionally satisfying that “the spectator leaves his seat fully aware he never will be quite the same individual he was before.”³⁷

When Bala was shuttling between India and the U.S. three important events took place in her life which evidenced India’s and the world’s recognition of her pre-eminence in the field of Indian dance. All the three bestowed honours on her both as a dancer and an individual. In 1973 she was invited to preside over the Madras Music Academy’s annual conference and was given the title, “Sangeeta Kalanidhi,” the first and the only dancer to have been selected for this singular honour. Presiding over the session, Bala used the occasion to trace the history of training that she had had since her fifth year and thanked profusely her grandmother Dhanammal, her mother Jayammal, her guru Gauri Ammal, her teacher Kandappa Mudaliar, members of her orchestra and the several people that helped her attain this stature. This included Ariakkudi Ramanuja Iyengar, Uday Shankar and others. How long and arduous her journey had been could be known from Bala’s humble and reverential tributes paid to those who were responsible for shaping her destinies as a performing artist.

In 1975 Bala was made the Fellow of the Sangeet Natak Akademi, an honour bestowed on select scholar - performers in the country and in 1977 she was honoured with Padma Vibhushan by the Government of India. In 1978 she was invited by the Committee on Research in Dance (CORD) at Hawaii to deliver an address to its members. She called the



Bala and Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay
during the fellowship award function, 1975

lecture ‘Reflections - on the art of dancing in general and Bharata Natya in



particular". She says that to satiate the subconscious urge, to provide succor to the indefinable instinct of artistic creation and to fulfil a spiritual urge, "the rigour of the discipline (of the dance form) is annulled by the joy of its beauty."³⁸ She explains how Bharata Natyam, the dance that delineates the divinities, stands out as a "God-centered" form. She enumerates its features and its speciality very vividly. In the same year Bala received the "Desikothama" (Hon. Doctorate of Letters) award from Viswa-Bharati at Shanti Niketan. It was awarded to her by Shri Morarjee Desai, the then Prime Minister of India.

Bala suffered a stroke while in the U.S. in 1978 and never completely recovered. There were requests for her to accept residency at Wesleyan University in 1980 (Wesleyan had virtually become her 'second home' since 1962) and she obliged. She also did so in 1981. Later she rejected any offers of either performances or travels. She passed away on February 9, 1984 leaving a large number of her admirers and friends.

The world of dance recognised what a loss her absence meant. Scholars, dancers, high officials and scores of others to whom Bala's dance remained a soul filling experience including several of the American students attended the last rites and each one narrated how Bala was important to their lives.

Such was the life of one of the most illustrious dancers of the country to whom life and art were inseparable. To live one is to live the other. No other artist of our times suffered so much - both personally and artistically - but stood firm on integrity of mind and art, sincerity of purpose, setting high

goals of perfection and purity as our ancestral saints had prescribed for the mortals on earth !

Balasaraswati's Art :

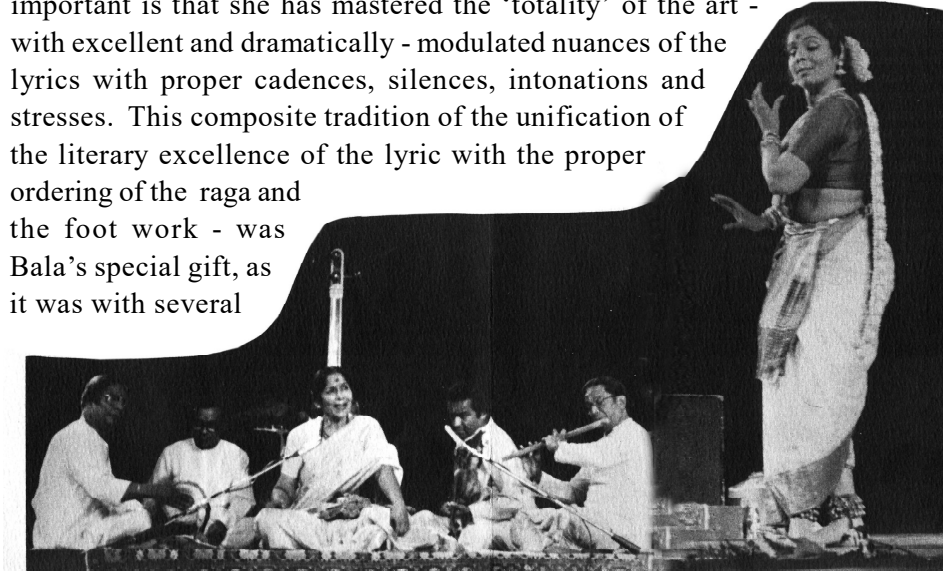
Balasaraswathi was on the stage for sixty years : she started learning dance at the age of five and continued to dance till 1981 - a long innings by any stretch of imagination for a woman-dancer to be active, despite moods of despair that slowed down the pace occasionally. In 1982, the Government of India invited her to participate in the Festival of India in Britain and she rejected the offer saying that she would not be able to do justice to her art as she was not well³⁹. One can compare this firm denial with her peeved complaint to Beryl de Zoete that she was not getting opportunities to show her art to public, perhaps since she was past her prime and was heavy in built !⁴⁰ Looking at both the statements made by the same person, one would realise the integrity and sincerity of a dancer who kept the art's purity and 'public-worthiness' high among her priorities. Bala's whole world centres round her art, the art of Bharatanatyam which was for her, 'divinity incarnate' - a vocation that preoccupied her mind and body since she firmly believed that this alone would bring her 'salvation' - not necessarily in the Vedantic sense of the term, but the fulfillment of a soul through 'order' and 'beauty of pattern' which dance alone supplies. She considered herself as a being, moving around the *atman* (the hard core of the universe) as many other planets and the electrons do and so is 'deeply spiritual'.⁴¹ She further explains : As far as my knowledge (or ignorance) of the various other dance-systems of the world goes, the purpose and purport of dancing - that is, of man's finding his essential hard core through the beauty of regularised movement - is realized mostly at the sub-conscious level, the dancer is not necessarily aware of its inner spiritual meaning. He or she may even take it as nothing more than an exalted experience in the sensual and sensuous.⁴²

Bala firmly believed that Bharatanatyam "revealingly brings to the forefront that it is ultimately and intimately oriented to the hard core, variously called the *Atman* or God. It is a revelation not only to the performing artiste; but, in an equal measure, to the audience also."⁴³ In simpler terms, Bala wholeheartedly believed that the in-built orderliness, discipline and yearning for the supreme that one would find in Bharatanatyam and striving to achieve a relationship with the 'hard core' of the universe is salvation. That is why she is "a puritan at heart and a purist in art !" ⁴⁴

This takes us directly to Bala's dancing and singing virtuosity. The tradition of serving God through dance and music has been a rigorous practice for centuries. In spite of the fact that it was vitiated by a few bringing disrespect to many is symptomatic of the depraved practices of the human beings - punishing the majority innocent for the minority defaulters ! Bala always said that she was singularly fortunate to have been born in a family in which the tradition of music and dance had been the focus of life for generations.⁴⁵ She believed in and upheld these traditional values as no other dancer in the contemporary world did. For her dance is god-realization. It looks a paradox that a 'Devadasi' resurrects the art of Bharatanatyam - for performing which a whole community was condemned !

It was with pride, coupled with "temporal nostalgia" that Balasaraswati claims that "during my lifetime I have seen the art of Bharata Natyam rescued from ignominy and restored to a position of respect and world-wide interest."⁴⁶ She adds, with a sense of wounded pride : "those who supported me in the past often had to justify and support the whole cause of dance."⁴⁷

There are several reasons why Balasaraswati's art has had an everlasting and elevating experience for three generations of audience. One of the most important is that she has mastered the 'totality' of the art - with excellent and dramatically - modulated nuances of the lyrics with proper cadences, silences, intonations and stresses. This composite tradition of the unification of the literary excellence of the lyric with the proper ordering of the raga and the foot work - was Bala's special gift, as it was with several



Bala conducting a dance recital by Lakshmi. L to R : T. Ranganathan, M.S. Ramdas, Balasaraswati, K. Ramaiah and T. Viswanathan with Lakshmi at the American Dance Festival, 1977

families of temple dancers from Puri to Tanjavur. Bala excelled all of them since she had excellent teachers - Dhanammal, Jayammal, Kandappa and Gauri Ammal. Bala has developed a special quality of “aural visuality” - her singing a lyric presents a picture of a happening (or is it a series of images created by words) - and “visual aurality” - each image she created with her abhinaya can be 'heard' and enjoyed ! It remains a wonder as to how she (and she is the last and one of the best in the tradition of temple dancer-singers!) mastered both the arts in a sweet synthesis. As Narayana Menon said, “her enactment is the recreation of the idiom of dance the subtleties inherent in the music.”⁴⁸ Bala's achievement is a part of the South Indian tradition of “Karnatakam” - which stands for temple serenity and the learned connoisseur's discriminating aesthetic enjoyment.

Bala is equally lyrical in her hand gestures and facial expressions. She is the epitome of 'studied control'; there is always an understatement; you want to see more and more. “She spoke with her hands,” said a reviewer,⁴⁹ stressing on the “elemental sensuousness” of her gestures. She would weave out images through her fingers. Her eyes trace out and transfix the space, size and mass : Is the object big or small? How big is it or how small? Is the person far away? or near? Is he sad or joyful? Does he reject you? Intrude into your privacy? Enters into your life when the husband is around? - She answers all these questions through her eyes, eye-brows, frowns and so on.

Her little glances, oblong looks, wide-eyed wonders specify also the mood of the heroine as well of that of the “other” person to whom the lyric is addressed. This “alternate persona” is the special feature of a padam; the speaker and the listener - both are present and we know the speaker's overt speech and we also know the silent listener's covert words. This makes the “deep structure” of abhinaya a many-layered explication. This also involves “synthesizing the tiny elements” of varied suggestivity to add depth to the meaning of the lyric. In this sense the rendering of a lyric - especially the padam and the javali - become a “dramatic exposition of an excruciating situation, for each Padam is an "experienced moment" recollected and recreated” .

Bala is often called “the queen of abhinaya”; she is the queen of this expository kind of dramatic monologue. Among the several commentators of Bala's art, it was Allen Hughes that spoke of a dramatic element dominant in her dance.⁵¹ This dramatic element is the result of her intentional and vivid

portrayal of two persons in an intense interplay of opposed points of view. This makes each dramatic monologue - as, for example, in Robert Browning's major dramatic lyrics - an experience of an intense moment with all its ramifications.

Bala's very rich and varied repertoire - the large store consisting of a hundred padams, about sixty Jawalis, ten dance-dramas and innumerable slokas, padyams and varnams - was a treasurehouse carefully stored and guarded for over five generations of singer-dancers of the family. Such a sincerity and seriousness of the purpose of art, ability to provide her audience such experience that is unique and unsurpassed, the display of sensitively eloquent gestures, the subtle variations of each word of the song, the improvisations that testify the word-images and the totality of all these elements, into a wholesome experience - these then speak abundantly of Bala's unsurpassed artistic excellence. And Balasaraswati remains to be a **dancer's dancer**.

Notes

1. Reported in N. Pattabhi Raman and Anandhi Ramachandran, "T. Balasaraswati : The Whole World in Her Hands", originally published in *Sruti* in two instalments : Jan-Feb., 1984 and March 1984; Reprinted in *Sangeet Natak* 72-73 (Special Issue on Balasaraswati) April-September, 1954. p.36.
It is reported that some mischief makers persuaded the impresario, Mr. Nabokov, in-charge of the Tokyo East-West Encounter, that Bala was too old and prove to be a damp squib." Mr. Nabokov, accordingly, asked Balasaraswati to put off her departure. With Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan's intervention, Bala and her troupe could go to Tokyo and perform in the festival. Kapilaji even went to the festival and introduced the artiste to the audience. As the curtains came down, and as if by signal, the audience rose to its feet and cheered on and on. Nabokov came to her backstage, knelt down like the old - fashioned European he was, took her hands in his and said, tears in his eyes : "I'm sorry what a great mistake would it have been not to have you here !" *Sangeet Natak* 72-73, p.26.
2. G. Venkatachalam, *Dance in India*, New Delhi : Nalanda Publications, p. 20.
3. T stands for Tanjavur. Dancers and Nattuvanars used the place names from where they hailed as initials before their names. If there are two initials before a Devadasi dancer/ nattuvanar's name, the first one indicates the place from where they hail and the second refers to their mother. For details see, Anne-Marie Gaston, *Bharata Natyam; From Temple to Theatre*, New Delhi : Manohar, pp. 127-131.
4. V.K. Narayana Menon, *Balasaraswati*, New Delhi, India Cultural Centre, 1966. p.12.
5. Dhanammal's initial reluctance and subsequent acceptance of Bala's initiation into

- dance has been described in Patabhi Raman & Ramachandran, *Sangeet Natak*, p.25.
6. Bala's Presidential address given to the 47th Annual Conference of the Madras Music Academy, published in NCPA Journal, 1966, p.47.
 7. Ibid.
 8. Ibid., p.48. This is Bala's own epithet.
 9. The famed Quartet - Chinnaiah, Ponnaiah, Sivanandam and Vadivelu. For details see Anne-Marie Gaston, pp. 122-123, 142-146 and 150-155.
 10. *Sangeet Natak* (Sp. issue), p.56.
 11. Presidential address, p.47.
 12. Ibid.
 13. Ibid.
 14. V.K. Narayana Menon, *Balasaraswati*, p.26.
 15. Presidential address, Madras Music Academy, p. 47.
 16. Special Issue, *Sangeet Natak*, p.27.
 17. "The Whole World in Her Hands", the title of N. Patabhiraman and Anandhi Ramachandran's article, is borrowed from Sastry's advice to Bala. For Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry's life and influences, see M. Nagabhushana Sarma's article in *Nartanam*, II, 3 (2003).
 18. Dr. V. Raghavan, an eminent Sanskrit scholar was Secretary of the Madras Music Academy and was instrumental in establishing a School for Dance and Music under its aegis.
 19. Satyajit Ray, "Working with Bala", *Sangeet Natak* : Special issue, p. 66.
 20. Bala's interview, *Sangeet Natak* : Special issue, p. 31.
 21. Dr. V. Raghavan, "Balasaraswati's Classical Bharata Natya School", Chennai : Dr. V. Raghavan Centre for Performing Arts, 2004. pp. 328-330.
 22. She had narrated how she was able to visit the Murugan temple and perform a dance sequence secretly. She believed that only after this worship, her career was once again bright. Bala's interview, *Sangeet Natak* : Special issue, pp.28-29.
 23. G. Venkatachalam, *op cit.*, p. 20.
 24. Citation presented to T. Balasaraswati by the Sangeet Natak Akademi, March 25, 1955.
 25. *Sangeet Natak Akademi Bulletin*, No.8 (1958), pp. 22-23.
 26. *Op. cit.*, p.20
 27. Special issue, p. 82.
 28. Quoted by V.K. Narayana Menon, "A true symbol of dance tradition", *The Hindu*, Sunday, February 19, 1984, p.28.
 29. Walter Terry, quoted in the Special Issue, p.29.
 30. Allen Hughes, "Balasaraswati's Art", *The New York Times*, November 25, 1962.

31. Luise Elcanes Scripps studied ballet from the age of six and pursued a post-graduate degree in ethno-choreography. In 1953 she married Samuel H. Scripps of the Scripps - Howard newspaper family. She became Bala's disciple in 1962. Luise and Samuel Scripps founded the American Society for Eastern Arts which sponsored Bala's visits to the U.S. several times.
32. *Sangeet Natak*, Special Issue, p. 46.
33. V.K. Narayana Menon, "A true symbol of Dance Tradition," *The Hindu*, Feb 19, 1984.
34. Lord Harewood, as reported in the Special Issue, pp. 82-83.
35. Renee Renouf, *Thought*, August 31, 1965.
36. Quoted in *Sangeet Natak*, Special Issue on Balasaraswati, p. 28.
37. Renee Renouf, *Thought*, August 31, 1965, p. 50.
38. "Reflections," Lecture given by Bala at the CORD at Hawaii in August 1978.
39. Lakshmi Viswanathan, "Bala - the Artiste and the Person," *A Tribute to Balasaraswati and Ben Sommers*, Souvenir published on the International Dance Day, 19 January, 1986.
40. Reported in the Special Issue of the *Sangeet Natak*, p. 41.
41. "Music and the Dance," Bala's Lecture at the Music Academy, NCPA Journal, 1984, p.42.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Reflections, p. 6.
45. "Music and the Dance," p. 43.
46. "On Bharata Natyam," Bala's Lecture at the Tamil Isai Sangam Award Lecture. *Sangeet Natak* : Special Issue, p.6.
47. Ibid.
48. V.K. Narayana Menon, "A true symbol of dance tradition," *The Hindu*, Feb. 19, 1984.
49. Subrata Banerjee, "Taking of a Legend," *Patriot*, Feb. 28, 1984.
50. Allen Hughes, "Balasaraswati's Art," *The New York Times*, Nov. 25, 1962.

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