

T. Balasaraswati: The Whole World in Her Hands

N. PATTABHI RAMAN with ANANDHI RAMACHANDRAN

This is a day in 1961. In Udupi (Karnataka), the sky is a pale blue, hanging over the shrine of the darkling god below like a canopy reflecting the radiance of his personality. Within the temple, it is a dark in the sanctum sanctorum but, in the mellow light of oil lamps, the figure of Krishna manifests itself captivatingly in the form of covetous Mohini with a smile that tugs at the heart of the worshipper. The air is heavy with the fragrance of sandal paste, tulasi leaves and burning incense, and the worshipper breathes it and feels the fragrant presence of the Lord within. The chanting accents the enchanted feeling and like the murmurs of Mesmer transports the men and women thronging the House of the Lord to a momentary heaven.

Krishna nee begane, baro.... The ever so sweet refrain of the famous song of Vyasaraya sung in a honeyed voice begins to penetrate the consciousness of the pilgrims — natives of the town as well as those come from faraway places — and dozens of pairs of eyes turn slowly to see a dancer singing and miming the beckoning song in the brighter lit hall in front of the *sanctum*. The dancer is not a Mohini by any stretch of imagination. She is not young, she is perhaps in her forties, built big, and is dressed in a pearl-white sari with emerald green border. She compels attention. Perhaps not many at the temple know who the miming matron is. There has been no prior announcement of the event. The dance is a spontaneous, spur of the moment offering to Krishna by the woman who has made *Krishna nee begane* one of the most famous items in the dance repertoire by her extraordinary miming of it.

Krishna nee begane, baro.... The singing is exquisite. The dancing stirs the imagination. Come hither, Krishna, she portrays mother Yasodha calling her beloved. A second voice joins in calling out the invitation, that of Gnanasundaram, a working colleague of Balasaraswati's. T. Balasaraswati, the enchantress of the dancing world, she is the matron who is singing and dancing. The pilgrims marvel at the many different ways she beckons Krishna. Unconsciously, the pilgrims turn towards the *sanctum*, to see if the god-child is answering the call. They think he is for who can resist when Balasaraswati beckons?

Kasi peetampara.... The mind's eye sees Krishna, dressed in the finest brocaded silk from Varanasi, a diamond-studded flute in his hands, fragrantly anointed with sandal paste, wearing a beautifully strung

mala or garland of vyjayanti flowers.

Jagado dharaka namma, Udupi Sri Krishna.... Mother Yasodha calls to Krishna and the child comes to her. She chides him for eating dirt and asks him to open his little mouth to find proof. Krishna laughs and opens his mouth... and lo, it is not dirt that the mother beholds — and the gathered pilgrims see — but the three Worlds. In a moment laden with magic, Balasaraswati, now as Yasodha, now as Krishna, makes the awe-struck worshippers see the Blue God transform himself into the very Universe and then become the playful child again. One man in the throng is not enchanted but enraged that anyone should have the audacity to dance within the precincts of the temple any more, since that kind of offering had been legally proscribed. He objects but it seems Caesar's civil law can't prevail in the Kingdom of God that is Sri Krishna's temple. He is taken in hand quietly but firmly by a quintet of worshippers, led outside and left to rage there. The dancing goes on.

Balasaraswati, whom none excels in abhinaya or mimetic dance, now portrays Krishna as conceived in a pair of other famous songs, *Jagado dharana* in Kapi and *Naninne dhayana* in Kanada. She is possessed, it seems, by the idea that Krishna is indeed responding to her offering. It is a thrilling experience for her and she returns to her home in Madras with her heart suffused with its continuing vibrations.

Entering her house, then in Egmore, she recounts her "experience" to her mother Jayammal. She exclaims: "Amma, why am I still living in this world after this experience? I wish Sri Krishna had taken me away." Mother Jayammal is deeply moved and responds startlingly: "Yes, I wish He had done it. How extraordinarily fortunate would it have been if He had..." She trails off, lost in the special feeling of the moment, vicariously savouring her famous daughter's experience.

As Balasaraswati recalls the incident for us, it occurs to us that such an experience could be had only by a person for whom art is yoga, a sadhana, and whose dedication has led her to practise her art to perfection. It occurs to us, too, that the remark her mother made could only be a reflection of a love given for its own sake, untinged by possessiveness, and of an attitude that enabled the mother to see the experience from her daughter's point of view.

Balasaraswati is excited when she tells us about the incident, but having told it, she lapses into a reverie. Silence. She must have been thinking about her mother, for presently she says: "Do you see what kind of a woman my mother was? For her, music was God. When she sang, it was full of raga bhava. And how many padams, how many javalis she could sing! Well, all of it was the gift of that lady over there." She points to a large photograph of her mother's mother, the late Veena Dhanammal, framed and hung on the wall behind the main sofa in her living room.

Balasaraswati's dance began, fittingly, as an offering to Sri Krishna.

When she was a toddler two or three years old, her family lived in George Town in Madras, on Ramakrishna Street. George Town in those days was, as her cousin brother T. Sankaran recalls, a veritable *sangita peetam* or seat of music and many a talented artiste chose to reside there. Dhanammal herself lived there and held court every Friday evening in her own regal way, even when she was anything but affluent. On the ground floor of the family's residence lived the house owner, a veritable human antique by the name of Kamakoti Ammal, who was very fond of her "Balakutty" or little Bala. On all the four walls of the *koodam* or main hall of her place were hung a number of paintings rendered on glass, on canvas and so on by the artists of what is today known as the Tanjavur School. A remarkable feature of this gallery was that every one of the paintings depicted Krishna. "I used to look at them with my mouth wide open," recalls Bala. "So many different paintings of Krishna and many with semiprecious stones in red, green and other colours encrusted on them!"

The sun might fail to rise, but Kamakoti Ammal never failed to call "Balakutty" every morning and ask her if she wouldn't come and wake up Krishna. This was no joking matter for the child and she used to respond by quickly going over to the old lady's place and "waking" Krishna up to the accompaniment of song and dance, much of it of her own improvisation. Bala officiated similarly over the "ceremonies" marking the noontime puja, during the evening twilight hour and so on. "You know," she says, "I used to do this six times daily. I still remember it all vividly." She smiles, with some inner satisfaction, and then says with a sigh: "I wonder in what shape that house is now."

At that time, my mother made for me a *kunjalam* set with stones," she continues. *Kunjalam* is a hairpiece consisting of a small, dome-shaped pendulous drop made of gold or other metal and hung from a silken cord. The drop is set with rubies or garnets and other stones and completed with a circular row of pearls. The cord is pleated with the hair, so that the drop hangs at the end of the braid. Bala calls to her darling grandson Aniruddha, daughter Lakshmi's offspring, and when he comes to her she points to the fact that the little fellow, fair of skin and looking every inch a potential dancer, is wearing the same *kunjalam* now. He is also wearing his grandma's pendant of rubies. As she looks at him with tender affection, we wonder whether she sees child-god Krishna in her grandson too.

The conversation stops for a while because Balasaraswati is not very well these days and she has to pause now and then and regain her strength. We look around and recall our first of many visits to the house at Kilpauk, off the New Avadi Road, in Madras. It is a Friday evening. Even as we cross her threshold, the lovely fragrance of fresh jasmine greets us. We seat ourselves on the main sofa of the living room ensemble; it is covered in red fabric and looks and feels comfortable. To our right is a large, framed photograph of Bala's



Veena Dhanammal (right)
Jayammal (below)
(Photos: S.N.A. Archives)



mother Jayammal, daughter of Dhanammal and a remarkable singer in her own right. On the wall behind us is the photograph of Dhanammal playing the veena. Closer to the ceiling on the wall to our right is yet another photograph of Dhanammal, a product of the late cartoonist Mali's craftsmanship. It is a head shot, very close up, printed on cloth and now deeply ridged and looking surrealistic. The photographs at eye level are all festooned with garlands of jasmine. Flowers are hung over the door frame also. Jasmine, sweet-smelling jasmine. The garlands and the fragrance are evidence of the fact that those engaged in the fine arts like to surround themselves with fragrant flowers and joss sticks and also wear perfumes. The greatness and purity of jasmine, we think, can be found in the art of all those who may be called the legatees of the late Dhanammal's priceless heritage. Is it possible that it is their love of the flower's fragrance which makes their art bloom?

To our right is a large glass case mounted on an elaborately carved rosewood base. In the case is a veena that belonged to the late Dhanammal. Kept along with it is a small-scale tambura. On another wall of the room, to our left, is a glass-fronted built-in almirah or shelf. Displayed in it are several costume dolls from different countries. As our eyes move further on, we see a wide door leading out to an open verandah and a garden. At the far end of the room is a large doll house set on wheels. The child in Bala is revealed by these various articles. "Ammamma it is who has collected all these," explains Lakshmi. "She loves dolls and enjoys collecting them."

On that first visit, Lakshmi tells us that Balasaraswati is averse to all publicity. "She will not agree to meet and talk with you. Moreover, she is not quite well." She is polite but conveys the message quite firmly. We meet Bala too. She had been resting and looks wan. "What's there to write about me?" she asks and insists her dancing days are over and she wants no publicity. We tell her that the profile we are planning isn't intended as publicity, certainly Bala didn't need publicity! We acknowledge the fact of her poor health but ask how a magazine devoted to the classical music and dance of South India could fail to write about the art and accomplishments of the great Balasaraswati. We offer to put up with inconveniences, to visit with Bala any number of times and for brief periods so that our interviews do not cause any strain whatsoever. Lakshmi nods her head but it is a nod of understanding and not of assent. Eventually, weeks later, after we have talked, in pursuit of our story, to a number of other persons who had known or worked with Balasaraswati in one way or another, Lakshmi persuades Bala to talk with us. Now we are again in Bala's house.

Bala has started talking freely. Conversation with her is a great experience in itself. She may not be on the stage, but her mind dances still, nuanced thoughts take shape as in her abhinaya, aided by snatches of singing and vivid facial and hand gesture which punctuate

her speech. She offers excerpts from various padams. Remaining seated in a chair, she mimes a few phrases or sequences. She recalls the poetry of Tayumanavar. She talks about the pranava mantra. She recalls the talents of various dancers of the past. She refers to her health problems. The bhava of her singing, the emotions displayed through delicate gestures, the images described by her long, tapering fingers all create a sense of wonder in us. Just sitting and talking in her living room, she seems a greater artiste than many presently active on the stage.

Later on, writer R.K. Narayan makes a similar observation in remarks to us. In the nineteen thirties, it was Bala who made many a young person, otherwise busy chasing adventure, realize what a great art Bharatanatyam is. On a stage quite bare, with nothing but a dim and naked bulb overhead, Bala worked magic and the curious became converts. And she worked the magic all by herself, drawing on her immense talents and aided by nothing outside of her except the music provided by her mother and her associates and the nattuvangam of her guru.

With this or that popular dancer, we may have room to wonder whether her reputation is fully deserved or why she is even hailed at all. No such thought occurs in the case of "Bala", as she is called by the many who respect and love her. To the cognoscenti of Madras, there has never been a greater dancer than Bala, and there never will be. If dance is Yoga, she has revealed the Ultimate Reality, the core of the truth about art and aesthetics. Today, when she has retired her limbs from formal dancing and put the past behind her, she is granted even more respect and loyalty than when she was in her prime. She has become a legend in her own lifetime.

An important feature of Bharatanatyam, known fifty years ago as Sadir, is that a single dancer is expected to portray two or even more personae and a variety of emotions, without the aid of different costumes for the various parts. In presenting a padam in the language of dance, the performer may have to represent the nayaka as well as the nayika, sometimes the lady friend of the heroine as well, or even the "other woman" towards whom the heroine directs her jealousy. And in doing all this, the dancer has to mind the very strict grammar governing the various movements and gestures, the grammar and the nuances of a highly refined and a stylized dance language. But even as a writer, while minding the grammar of his chosen language, has room for employing his skills and imagination creatively, the dancer too has the opportunity to give expression to her creativity and conceptions, provided she has the skills to do so.

All through her career, Bala has offered ample proof of this. "Exponent is a word which can more truly be applied to her than to many other Bharatanatyam performers," Nissim Ezekiel wrote in the Times of India many years ago. "What one comes across in her

dancing is something grave and devotionally eloquent, weighty in content, lucid in perfection and purity of intention, uncorrupted by mannerisms or eccentricity... The lesson to be learnt from her is that there is no substitute for perfection of technique and profundity of feeling."

What drew attention to Balasaraswati even when she was quite young was her great talent for conveying a variety of emotions and feelings subtly through an infinite range of imagery, and the delicate use of the classical language of the classical dance. "Her abhinaya is pure and serene, marked by all that is best in the language of mime and gesture," a ballet critic wrote long ago. "It is the result of more than knowledge, beyond technique and beyond conscious application. The grace and the expressiveness of her art is like the grace of a flower which opens up gloriously to the tender beams of the morning sun. The... bhavas spring from the innermost depths of her being. She is more than a dancer, an artiste with the highest dramatic power. When she dances, she ceases to be a dancer and becomes one with the character she portrays. This is great art."

As we carry on our conversation with Bala, we marvel at her accomplishments but also regret she has paid little serious attention to training anyone in India.

"Balasaraswati's art will vanish with her," wrote Dr. Narayana Menon, who is the present Chairman of the Sangeet Natak Akademi in New Delhi, more than fifteen years ago. "There's not likely to be another like her. The kind of discipline and training that she had had and perfection of little details in dance would be very difficult for anyone else to capture. Other dancers may be younger, they may be more attractive, more streamlined, electroplated and so on, but Balasaraswati possesses the real quintessence of Bharatanatyam." Balasaraswati's dance may be "a difficult act to follow," but that does not quite explain why she has been indifferent to training others.

"You see," she explains when we ask her about it, "I didn't even teach my daughter Lakshmi for a long time because of my feeling that my art might as well perish with me. Only when I went to America and started teaching to American students did I decide to train Lakshmi." These words recall to us an ancient practice. When a king or queen passed on, his or her prized possessions were interred with the mortal remains. Such buried possessions have been unearthed centuries later much to the joy and enlightenment of subsequent ages. But unfortunately the video cassette has been discovered many years too late and the treasure that was Bala's dancing can survive only in the memories of those who were fortunate enough to see her dance in her prime years and only for so long as they themselves live.

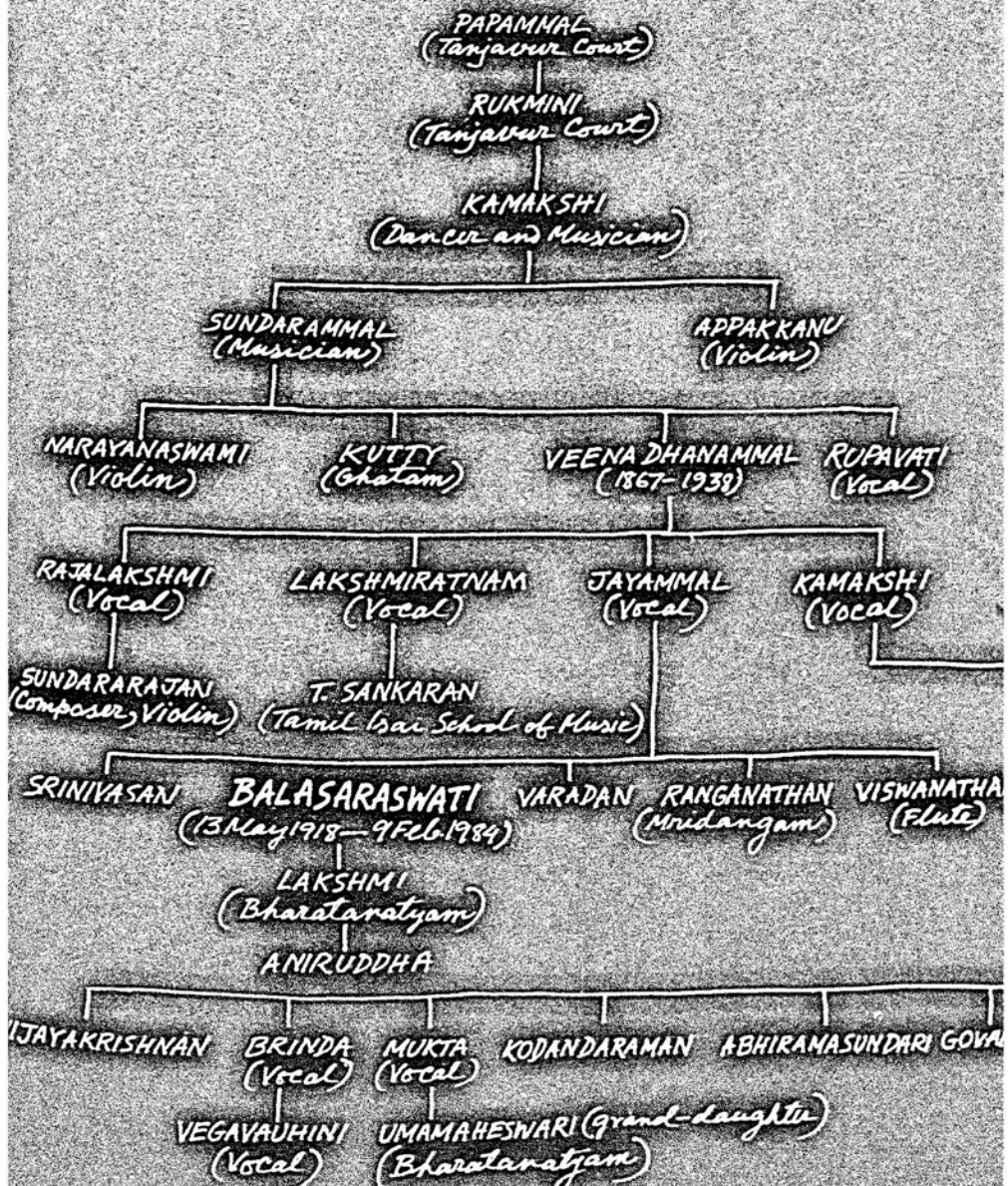
Satyajit Ray has, of course, made a documentary on Bala, on behalf of the National Centre for Performing Arts in Bombay. The Institute of Film Technology in Madras screened it for us and we are glad to have

seen it, even though it does not do full justice to Bala's art. No film of a dance can offer us the same experience that we get from watching it live. All the films that offer us the great ballets of West, even the best of them, only underscore this observation. This, however, is only one drawback of the Ray documentary. Another is that, although the film offers a twelve-minute sequence of Bala doing *Krishna nee begane*, it shows the great dancer past her prime and in a beach setting where the dancer has to clutch her billowing sari, thus adding a new adavu to her number. The film was to have been made in the mid-sixties, but the project fell through for reasons Ray never found out. Ten years later, Balasaraswati still had a regal presence, as Ray put it, which took his breath away. He noticed she had lost weight — due to diabetes, he had been told — but had lost none of her poise. Ray felt a twinge of regret at having missed making the film when Bala was in her prime. He consoled himself, however, with the thought that Bala filmed at the age of fifty-eight was better than Bala not being filmed at all. After seeing the film, despite our reservations, that's how we felt too.

The sad irony, however, is that Balasaraswati herself is the product of a family tradition which emphasized the handing down of its priceless artistic heritage from one generation to the next. She was born into a family which for a couple of hundred years at least had been involved intimately with the arts. That Bala is the granddaughter of the great Veena Dhanam is well-known, if for no other reason Bala herself proudly proclaims it. Dhanammal's grandmother, Kamakshi by name, was a dancer in the court of Tanjavur in the nineteenth century. She had learnt Sadir from one Ganapathi Sastri who lived in an enclave near Tiruvayyaru; he was an uncle of the famous composer-singer Patnam Subramania Iyer. Kamakshi was reputedly adept at singing too. Kamakshi's grandmother Papammal also was a Tanjavur court musician and dancer; this was in the eighteenth century. Papammal to her daughter Rukmini to Kamakshi to her daughter Sundarammal to Dhanammal to Balasaraswati — the latter born in 1918 — the family treasure of music and dance had been handed down, let us see, for six generations.

A comparable treasure was handed down again for six generations on the side of Kandappa Pillai, Bala's guru. Over that span, his family had provided a chain of nattuvanars or dance teachers. Kandappa Pillai's great-great-great grandfather was likely a contemporary of Papammal. Among his forefathers were Ponniah, Chinniah, Vadivelu and Sivanandam who together came to be known as the Tanjavur Quartet and justly earned great fame for their contributions to South Indian classical music and dance. Kandappa's father was Nellayappa Pillai who was thought of as the finest teacher of his time. Nellayappa Pillai taught dance to Gowri Amma and Bala's mother Jayammal. He was a treasure-trove of padams and javalis, including the compositions of Chinniah of the Quartet. He was a close friend of composer

BALASARASWATI'S FAMILY



Tiruvottiyur Tyagier and Fiddle Ponnuswamy. And he was related to Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, another great Bharatanatyam teacher.

Born in 1899, Kandappa Pillai was the product of this family of nattuvanars and inheritor of a great tradition. Nattuvanars in those days were not merely specialists in teaching; they were also masters of music and dance, capable of singing and dancing.

Bala represents, in a sense, a confluence, a *sangamam* of these two great streams of music and dance. Joining the confluence, as in Prayag, was perhaps another third stream, not physically visible, that of Saraswati, the goddess of learning. Bala must surely have received her blessing: Bala herself has seen Saraswati incarnate, in the form of grandmother Dhanam. Not only Balasaraswati, but brothers, cousins and other assorted relatives all seem to have distinguished themselves in one way or another, as vocalists or as players of veena, violin, mridangam and ghatam, for example.

With this background, it is not surprising that music and dance both acquired importance in Bala's life. "Herself a musician of high order," a citation reads, "Bala believes in rendering dance as a poem in gestures."

"If someone without knowledge of music performs a dance, how can we accept it?" She asks, emphasizing that she herself attaches primary importance to music and adds: "A dancer will shine only if she is soaked in music. My mother used to din this into my head even when I was too young to think."

Mother Jayammal started teaching music appreciation to Bala when the latter was barely five years old, so much so, the little girl could understand the language of music long before she could appreciate the import of words in songs. Jayammal had learnt dancing, as had her aunt Rupavati. But because she had a wonderful voice, she had opted for music. And because she and the others in the family had studied classical music properly and well, they were all able to understand the attributes of classical art and bring a sense of discrimination to Bharatanatyam as well.

Bala showed an aptitude for dance from a very early age. If Kamakoti Ammal who lived downstairs in their house egged her on, it was Mylapore Gowri Amma who seems to have given her the greatest inspiration to take up dancing seriously.

Gowri Amma was the daughter of a beauty, Doraikannu Ammal, who danced for Siva at the Kapaleeswarar Temple in Mylapore. She had great respect for Dhanammal and used to call on her often. She too was dancing at the Mylapore temple and had achieved considerable fame, especially for her ability to depict various emotions through facial gestures. Jayammal and her older sister Lakshmiratnam used to sing the padams during Gowri Amma's performances. This was in fact how the practice of women singing padams at dances began.

Bala was fascinated by Gowri Amma. Besides visiting with her as often as possible, she would also try to imitate her dance movements. As she recalls those days, she projects a sense of excitement.

"I used to dress up like Gowri Amma in a *jenti* or *thuya* sari, wear her own jewellery and try to dance like her. There would be scolding in the family and some raps on the knuckles too, but I couldn't be bothered by them." She explains that a *jenti* or *thuya* sari, popular among dancers because it wasn't expensive, was usually white organdy threaded with gold or silver.

Seeing little Bala's efforts to imitate her abhinaya, Gowri Amma suggested to Jayammal that Bala might be taught dancing. "Oh, no!" was Jayammal's reply. She was apprehensive about Dhanammal's response to this suggestion, and she wouldn't undertake anything without consulting her.

"One day she got up the courage to ask my grandmother." Bala continues. "Grandma, whose eyesight had weakened already, peered into space just for a trice and said No. She didn't budge even when Gowri Amma and Kandappa Pillai directly pressed the suggestion on her. But then she asked my mother one day whether her daughter, that's me, was squint-eyed. My mother answered in the negative. Next she asked if I had good, orderly rows of teeth. Yes, said my mother. Next question: is she good looking? My mother said that I was not a beauty but good looking all right. Finally she asked if I sang well. I had to sing to prove it. The test was over. Grandma finally gave permission for me to study dancing. Kandappa Pillai was then living just next door and I started learning properly. I was about four then. I guess my grandmother was afraid that if I studied dancing I might lose my interest in music, but she didn't have to worry."

Not everything connected with dance that she saw in those childhood days appealed to Bala. In fact there was one aspect that really frightened her. This was the practice of some dancers who performed with various kind of fruits and vegetables tied to their limbs and with knives in their hands. This must have been a contemporary gimmick. "With these appurtenances, they would dance... d'you know what... yes varnams in Ata tala, *Viriboni* in Bhairavi, in three tempos, no less," she recalls. "Another person would slice the vegetables with the knives while the girl was dancing. Both frightful and frightening, but the rhythm would be impeccable." Such experience notwithstanding, Bala loved dancing.

Jayammal arranged for Bala to study languages as well. She hired a lady named Radhamma, a scholar who knew *Bala Ramayanam* by heart and various other texts as well, to teach Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit. Fortyish and very kind, Radhamma who lived in the same house, was an able tutor and Bala learnt *Rangapati Ramapati Satakam*, Telugu padams and how to do abhinaya using only facial expressions, that is, without using the hands.

Her dance teacher was cast in a different mould. "Kandappan was a

stern task-master and he did not believe in sparing the rod," Narayana Menon has written. "The child had to work for long, strenuous hours of the mornings. The study of music too was part of the training." Bala herself recalls that often there would be recitals to give in the evening. On such occasions, she would have an early supper and, after being made up, would go to sleep, on the shoulders of her mother usually, before the performance. The morning after the performance, Kandappan would review with Bala the previous night's recital very critically and suggest corrections and improvements.

Stern though he was, Kandappa Pillai was a wonderful teacher. In her presidential speech at the Indian Fine Arts Society in 1981, she paid a rich tribute to him.

"If today, a few people know something about Balasaraswati, if organizations like this Society wish to honour her, the reason for it is not alone the art my guru taught me, but that, even when I was learning the art, he had taught me how to face the fame I might achieve and accept the criticism I might receive. He used to whisk me away as soon as a recital was over, for he was afraid I might get a swollen head from listening to praise."

Bala remembers that her grandmother was also very strict. "After I started learning to dance, she wouldn't let me sit down for even a minute. There was no question of resting or napping during the afternoon. *Vidya duraanam nasukham nanidra*, she would say. That is, those who pursue the arts shouldn't bother about comfort and sleep." Many great artists are full of themselves. Not so the great Balasaraswati. What she likes to talk about, time and again, is her grandmother. Thus, after referring to Dhanammal's strictness, she asks us if we know what kind of person Dhanammal was. And then she proceeds to offer a glimpse.

"When Dhanammal played the veena, everything would virtually come to a stop, for there had to be silence, total silence. In the kitchen, seasoning wouldn't be prepared because the popping of the mustard seed would disturb grandmother. The washing of clothes — entailing their beating on a stone — would stop. We would even stop walking around. The people of the street would also become quiet, without any of us asking for their co-operation.

"Vendors would be stopped at the end of the street and told that Amma was playing the veena and that they should return later." Bala's fingers go to her lips as she describes the extraordinary scene which was enacted almost daily. She picks up the narration again and tells us how Dhanammal would react if some did talk within the house when she was practising. Bala's cousin Sankaran had told us about Dhanammal's acerbic wit and this is underlined by what Bala tells us too. "Yes, if someone talked and disturbed her, grandmother would ask if anyone had noticed the culprit's great *gnanam*. That would silence the person for a long time again."

If Bala was subject to a regime of strict discipline, she also had the benefit of learning soulful padams from her grandmother and from Gowri Amma. By the time she was fifteen, she had learnt a very large number of them. "My grandmother had learnt a great number of Kshetrappa padams from one Balakrishnan who was more familiarly known as Baldas," explains Bala. "Gowri Amma had reportedly learnt several padams from Padam Ponnuswamy. She used to do abhinaya for Tamil padams, to sing herself while doing hand gestures. Her singing was marked by curves, glides and gamakam and full of bhava. My mother would urge me time and again to listen carefully."

Bala acquired considerable knowledge and skills from her contact with various others as well. She learnt abhinaya from one Chinnayya Naidu also. Even when she grew up, she didn't give up learning. Thus she studied later with Vedantam Lakshminarayana 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?"

Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai wasn't 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're your family's heritage, he said and with someone like your mother singing padams, you can have the whole world in your hands."

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

Direct learning from competent instructors was aided further by a supportive environment. Musicians, great or otherwise, would drop in frequently to talk to Dhanammal. Among those were Dharmapuri Subbarayar whose javalis earned him a great name, flutist Tiruppamburam Swaminatha Pillai, Kanchipuram Naina Pillai, and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. Tiruvottiyur Tyagier, son of Veena Kuppier, was another. In fact, over and above conversations marked by wit which gave Dhanammal's place the ambience of the great European salons, there would be mutual learning too. For example, Ariyakudi would learn padams from Jayammal, says Balasaraswati. Tyagier, for his part, would request Dhanammal to sing his varnams and "give them polish".

Polish and a special glow were what Balasaraswati herself gave to padams and javalis she learnt and sang. There was at least one occasion when a listener interrupted her song to shout that she should leave the singing to Jayammal. Many did perhaps hold the view that Jayammal was a better singer. But Bala has left no doubt about her own ability for creative interpretation, an ability which manifested

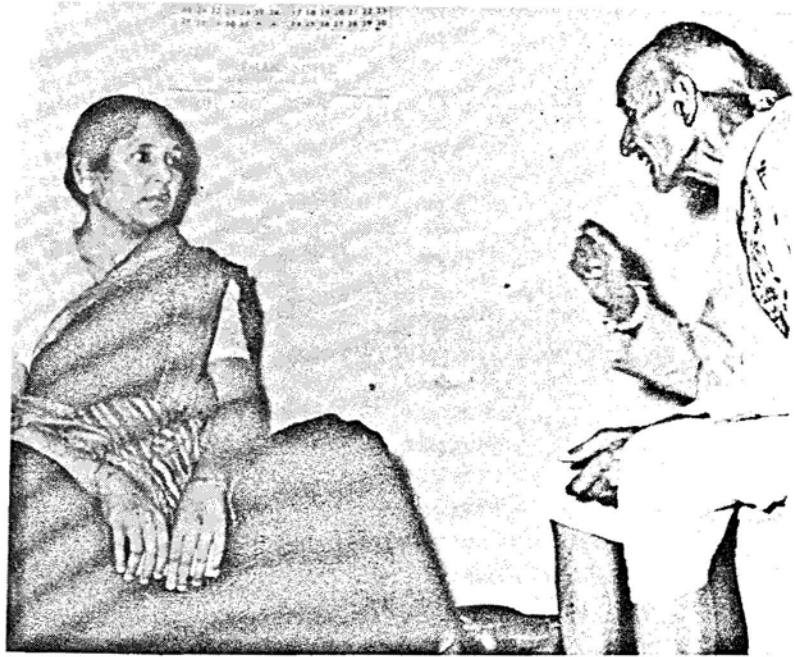
itself in her dancing also in a way that music and dance were beautifully intertwined and integrated.

If some felt Bala was a bit slow on her feet, she has shown that her mind is quick and alert to utilise creative possibilities. For example, at the end of one of her recitals at the Music Academy in Madras, Bala started singing and performing a mangalam — *Makula munaku ihapara mosagina neeku mangalam, subha mangalam* — from Tyagaraja's *Nowka Charitram*. While some members of the audience remained seated out of respect for the rendering of the *mangalam*, the others started to leave. But to everyone's surprise, the piece didn't end quickly. The way Bala performed it was to go through all the *upacharas* that would be performed in a temple, except she did it in the dance language. It was highly creative and obviously required not only dancing expertise but also intimate knowledge of the traditional temple rituals and undoubtedly also a sense of devotion.

The way Bala's interpretation of *Krishna nee begane* first took shape offers another illustration. Among visitors to her family home was a gentleman named Hayagreevachari from Dharwar. He used to come down to Kanchipuram to see Naina Pillai, and Bala's aunt Lakshmirathnam Ammal had invited him home, and he visited more than once. Bala remembers that the children described him as *Curram kanta chari* or one with a horse-neck. He it was that taught the family Vyasaraya's *Krishna nee begane*. It was not part of Bala's dance repertoire yet when, in 1933 or 1934, Jayammal sang the song during a recital her daughter was giving at the Rasika Ranjani Sabha in Mylapore. Bala had a sudden inspiration to dance to the song and did so improvisationally, the audience applauded, and that's how a great dance number was born. In the years following, she has given it considerable polish and made it shine most alluringly, but for all its repetition, it has remained fresh.

Bala was only fifteen or sixteen when she spontaneously composed the dance for *Krishna nee begane*. That would make it barely eight or nine years after her arangetram. The debut had taken place in Kanchipuram when she was seven years old. She recalls the occasion: "My arangetram took place at the Ammanakshi temple in Chengazhuneer Odai Street. Naina Pillai attended it. The news has spread that Dhanammal's grand-daughter was going to dance and a sizeable crowd had gathered."

When we are in Kanchipuram to talk to Kuppuswamy Mudaliar, the very old mridangam vidwan who for forty years had provided rhythmic support to Balasaraswati, as also to Gnanasundaram, we discover that the Ammanakshi temple is situated nearby. We look in. It is a small shrine but apparently is the site of a big festival every year. Bala has helped outfit it with electric lights. The presiding deity has a kind countenance. A lady performs *deepa aradhana* and offers *prasadam*. She says that the temple is very old and, echoing something that Bala



Balasaraswati with Lakshminarayana Sastri (*above*); with Ustad Mushtaq Hussain Khan and Pandit S.N. Ratanjankar (*below, second and third from left*).
(Photo: S.N.A. Archives)

had said too, informs us that Ammanakshi had made it her abode "in order to listen to music." Asked to explain, she says: "Our mother Ammanakshi is a native of Puttur, really. For the temple festival in that town, musicians from Kanchipuram used to go. Enamoured of their music, she accompanied them to Kanchipuram and told a boy who was playing hereabouts that she was going to reside here and arrangements should be made to offer her worship musically. That's why musicians get together every year to conduct a festival and give performances here." She adds that a small platform in front of the temple is where the musicians are seated during the concerts. It is the platform on which Bala must have made her dance debut.

Bala continues her recollection of the event. "When I was given an award by the President of India in the nineteen fifties, someone asked me what memory came to my mind. I told her that I remembered the occasion of my debut, when I was given an award by the 'President' of the music community." Naina Pillai had given her a sruti box on that occasion.

A recital that she gave in Madras soon afterwards was for all purposes a second debut. It had been arranged by a great patron of music and dance, Jalatarangam Ramaniah Chettiar, who had been responsible for introducing many a promising musician to a discriminating audience in Madras. According to T. Sankaran, he was a remarkable person who had played an outstanding and generous role in fostering the fine arts. For Bala's recital, he had gathered together a glittering audience consisting of musical stalwarts like Naina Pillai, violinist Govindaswamy Pillai, Pakkiri Pillai, Marungapuri Gopalakrishna Iyer and Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar. The performance was reportedly an outstanding success and left the audience feeling that an extraordinary dancer had arrived.

These successful debuts notwithstanding, there was opposition to her taking up a career in dancing. Many family members themselves counselled Jayammal against the move, possibly fearing that dance had a bleak future. "Isn't music enough, do we really need dance?" they asked.

But there was encouragement too. From Ariyakudi among others. Many engagements came her way and Bala danced with fervour and without stage fright. Yet she was still tender in age and not infrequently she would fall asleep before a performance! Better, though, than letting the audience fall asleep during a performance. The dancing damsel gathered glowing tributes as the years rolled by. The first half of the nineteen thirties saw her in her element. She was dancing beautifully and the few who faulted her sounded like sour-voiced soloists, for the rest had become part of the chorus that sang her praise.

Among those who became her admirers was Uday Shankar, himself a dancer who had received acclaim for his creative interpretation of the

dances of India, especially abroad. Bala was about fifteen when he came to Madras for a series of dance engagements. He attended one of her public performances and then requested — and was granted — a private recital. He responded by throwing a lavish dinner party for Jayammal, Kandappa Pillai and others of Bala's party at the Connemara Hotel. There he disclosed his hope that Kandappa Pillai and Bala both would join his globetrotting troupe. Seeing Bala dance had aroused the wish in him, he said, to propagate the great art of Bharatanatyam. But Jayammal answered in the negative. "Uday Shankar's dancing is different," she explained to the family, "it is also group dancing. Our dance doesn't fit in with it. Perhaps we could make money, but our art would be spoiled."

One of Uday Shankar's friends was an impresario by the name of Haren Ghosh. He introduced Bala to audiences in the north of India. Satyajit Ray has written about a performance in the now-vanished Senate Hall in Calcutta. "The year was 1935," he recalled in an article published in the Quarterly Journal of the National Centre for Performing Arts in December 1976, "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.... It didn't take long after her Calcutta performance for Bala to turn into a legendary figure in Indian classical dancing."

Other dancing dates in northern cities followed. Organizers of a big conference in Varanasi (then known as Benares) didn't have Bala's address, so they contacted her through the Music Academy which had already offered Bala its prestigious platform. Bala performed in Varanasi, this was in 1935 or 1936, she can't recall now, but she does remember that Tagore was among those who attended her recital. She also recalls something else and wants us to put it down in the article. "Y'know, the story has been spread by E. Krishna Iyer [a dance critic of Madras in those years] that he it was that arranged the trip and that he accompanied me to Benares. It has been picked up by others, but it's simply not true."

Bala's brother T. Viswanathan, who is present at the interview, adds that the false story was picked up by research scholars and it had now become part of the lore about Balasaraswati.

On the day she talks to us about her visit to Varanasi — and a subsequent successful recital at 'Santiniketan' — she is extremely weak. She had been quite seriously ill the previous week and devoted Lakshmi is providing her tender loving care on this her first day out of bed. She is feeding her a dosa and a little bit of curd. Her feeble appearance provides a sharp reminder of the fact that Balasaraswati has been dogged by illness for the better part of her life. In fact, her health failed in the second half of the nineteen thirties. She had a problem with her joints and her heart as well and perforce she

restricted herself to performing abhinaya. If this was not disappointing enough to a star at her zenith, her guru Kandappa Pillai decided to go with Uday Shankar after all. He joined Shankar in Almora, in U.P. However, the climate there didn't agree with his constitution. He wrote to Bala from there that he would return to the house where he had learnt music. As Bala recalls this during an earlier visit we made, a shadow of grief seems to cross her face, for Kandappa Pillai never did return to conduct Bala's dance recitals again; he died prematurely in 1941, at the age of forty-two. She feels faint and asks Lakshmi to bring her some sugar quickly. Lakshmi offers her a sweet and, sucking it, Bala slowly regains her strength.

The late nineteen thirties and the forties were really the dog days in Balasaraswati's career. Physically handicapped, she was also in the dumps emotionally. A young girl who had started her dancing career as Baby Kamala, and who was now entering the age where she was being referred to as Kumari, was now the darling of the dance-watchers. As far as the general dancing-going public was concerned, Bala was not quite in focus.

This situation grieved many who admired and respected Balasaraswati as one of the greatest artistes to spring out of the southern soil. The Music Academy continued to offer its stage to Bala and one of its pillars, Dr. V. Raghavan, helped to establish a dance school at the Academy where Bala could teach her art. He also worked with her on a book, published subsequently by the Academy under the title *Bharata Natyam*. "These days, you need books for everything, don't you?" Bala asks rhetorically, referring to the book. "The method of teaching-learning has changed with the virtual disappearance of gurukulavasam. Training in institutions requires books, examinations and things like that. It would be all right if the learning is acquired over a period of four or five years, as is the case in Rukmini Amma's Kalakshetra school. But what can I say, these days arangetrams are arranged after a training period lasting barely six months to a year. Some have completely lost their way... When I was learning to dance, it was examination every day. We had to worry that we should pass the test every single day."

The doldrum of the forties ended only when Bala made a religious offering of her art at a Murugan temple. That's a story retelling which must wait. What should be told here is the fact that when relief came, it came through the efforts of two individuals, one a Dutch woman and the other a dancer from North India. The Dutch lady was a research scholar by the name of Beryl de Zoete and the dancer was none other than Ram Gopal.

Beryl de Zoete came to Madras at the beginning of the fifties. Some dozen or more years earlier she had studied Balinese dance and drama and published a book about it. Her interest in Hindu dance and its language of gestures had now brought her to the south of India. By

1953, she had published a fascinating book entitled *The Other Mind*, in which she wrote about Bharatanatyam, Kathakali and other aspects of South Indian dance. During her stay in Madras, she encountered Balasaraswati, was impressed most deeply by her dance and, with the collaboration of Ram Gopal, later helped arrange recitals for Bala in New Delhi. This capital city of the now free India was the gateway to Bala's second career in dancing and greater recognition and rewards. An eminent dance critic of Madras, "a real *aficionado* but not quite unprejudiced" — who could that have been? — had told de Zoete that there was no point in seeing Balasaraswati, for she had become "an elephant". But the Dutch visitor wasn't quite convinced by this advice and when Dr. Raghavan told her that she must on no account miss Bala, she did go and see the dancer in her Egmore home.

"She received me warmly," de Zoete has written in her book, "and I was surprised to find her, though somewhat heavy in build, by no means elephantine, and very dignified and noble in bearing. She had not danced for several years in public, as she had suffered from rheumatism and heart trouble which had left her with a tendency to get fat. She told me she had spent a long time in hospital but no dieting did any good, and she was depressed because no one any longer wanted to see her dance. I remembered the much older dancers in Seville (Balasaraswati is not much over thirty)... one is always struck in Seville by the true dance-lover's fidelity to great exponents of the art, even when they are really old."

The sympathetic visitor again met Balasaraswati a month later, this time in the company of Ram Gopal who was eager to get Bala to perform in public again. At this request, Bala agreed to dance one morning at the theatre where he was giving evening recitals. She kept her promise and de Zoete, after seeing her dance, became one of her ardent champions.

Perhaps partly as a result of de Zoete's enthusiastic evangelism and partly because of Ram Gopal's recommendation, Balasaraswati performed in New Delhi. The capital capitulated quickly. Recitals, renewed recognition and rewards all came in quick succession. The Sangeet Natak Akademi gave her its prestigious award in 1955. Officialdom also took notice and Balasaraswati was awarded the "Padma Bhushan" in 1957. And the Rabindra Bharati University in Calcutta conferred a doctoral degree, *honoris causa*.

Balasaraswati, the queen of dance, had conquered India. The wider world now awaited her.



It is now a day in 1965. The place is not the small town of Udupi, but the big city of New York. And we are not in Sri Krishna's temple but

in Town Hall. It is a shrine of a different kind, where musicians and dancers aspiring to fame make their debut in New York, where they take their first big step in their professional careers. On stage is Balasaraswati. She is in her mid-forties but looking a bit older than that really, slow on her feet.

Krishna nee begane.... She sings and she mimes and the audience is in thrall. The passage of time seems to have slowed her down; but her art seems ageless.

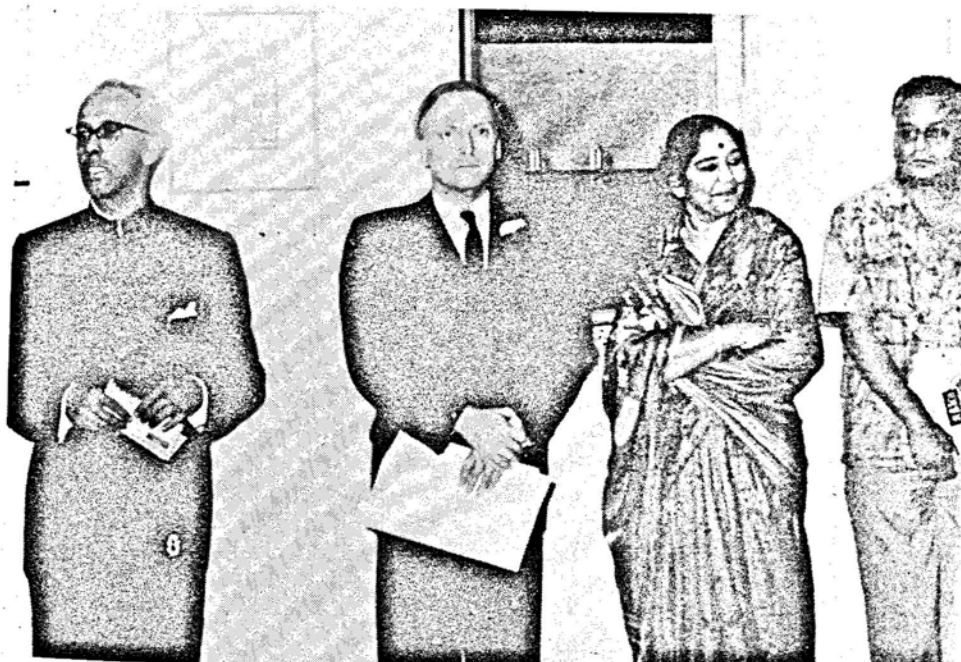
In the audience is a young Indian, as wonder-struck as most others. "I was wrong," he says to himself, thinking of a piece he had written for *Swatantra*, the well-known Madras weekly, at the beginning of the nineteen-fifties. In it he had extolled the virtues of a young dancer called Kamala and declared her as the regnant queen. Balasaraswati was, he had noted, not really dancing any longer — this was towards the end of the period when she was ill and dispirited. With intrepidity born of youth, he had written that "Balasaraswati is forty and fat." A kindly editor had corrected the published version to read that the dancer was no longer slim, but the verdict had been left untouched otherwise, to the annoyance of many in the Madras Establishment.

Like Phoenix rising from the ashes, Bala has returned to centre-stage from the shadows and, having conquered Delhi, is proudly pitching pennants of success and glory in the rest of the world. The young Indian in the Town Hall audience, among other things a correspondent for the *Deccan Herald* of Bangalore, writes a column recalling his earlier observation and apologizing for his then hasty remarks. Bala may be past forty, she may not be slim exactly, but she is back dancing... and how! Little does the young man know even then that he would have an opportunity about nineteen years later to write a deep profile of Balasaraswati.

Krishna nee begane baro... She sings it ever so beautifully and she mimes it with extraordinary vividness and charm. The beauty of the *dasa's* lyrics are transformed into the enchantingly lyrical dance of the *dasi*.

The Town Hall was not the first theatre abroad, nor New York the first foreign city, nor America the first country across the black waters, to which Bala's dancing feet took her. She made her foreign debut in fact at the Metropolitan Festival Hall in Tokyo, the capital city of the Land of the Rising Sun. The evening of her debut, one day late in 1961, the risen sun had quietly slipped down the western horizon to let the people of Japan see the star of India in her pristine glory.

Bala hadn't quite anticipated this event in Tokyo. Instead, there had been talk of her going to the Soviet Union. Kapila Vatsyayan, presently an adviser to the Central Government on education and a friend and admirer then as now, had tried but unsuccessfully to have Bala sent to Russia. Now she wanted Bala to perform at an East-West conference in Japan. There were, of course, important people who felt



Balasaraswati with Narayana Menon and Yehudi Menuhin (above, first and second from left); with S.N.A. Awardees (below), including Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer (extreme left) and Shambhu Maharaj (second from right).
(Photos: S.N.A. Archives)

a younger person should go; and each had a candidate of his or her own. Bala herself was a bit hesitant. But then she agreed and she and her party were about ready to embark on the journey. The mischief-makers were, however, not to be retired so easily. They persuaded the impresario in charge of the Tokyo event that Bala was too old and would prove to be a damp squib. Mr. Nabokov, the impresario, sent a cablegram to Bala asking her to put off her departure. But once again Vatsyayan intervened, and she persuaded Nabokov of the correctness of the choice. In the event, she herself attended the conference and introduced Bala to the audience. Bala followed it up, first with a demonstration and then a recital. As Bala recalls it, it was an experience which at first was mystifying to her. Perhaps it was that to the audience too, for during the entire performance the audience sat there, just sat there, without responding in any way, seemingly a massing of a thousand stone buddhas. But then, 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!" Kapila Vatsyayan, looking on, was delighted and all smiles.

Accompanying Bala on the trip was her brother Viswanathan, now sitting with us in Bala's drawing room as she talks about her life and art. "Around the time the trip was to be made," Bala further recalls, "Viswa was asked to an interview in connection with a teaching assignment he was seeking at the Madras University. But he decided to forego the interview and come help me. How can I ever forget this?" Cousin Sankaran explains that this was a self-effacing act on Viswa's part. In the event, it turned out alright for Viswa, for he was nevertheless appointed to the post of Reader in Music after a specially arranged interview on his return. He subsequently became a professor at the Wesleyan University in America and, like his elder brother Ranganathan, set up permanent residence there. He is with us in Madras on this day only because he has come to see ailing Bala.

It is improbable that any airline today will schedule a stopover in Tokyo on a flight from Madras to Edinburgh, in Scotland. But then airlines control only destinations, not destinies. Perhaps they don't do even that; that it was destiny anyhow decided Bala would go to Edinburgh soon. Present at the Tokyo event was Lord Harewood, a cousin of Queen Elizabeth. Watching Bala dance, he felt he was, in his own words, "in the presence of greatness." Perhaps that's what he said in a telegram he reportedly sent Prime Minister Nehru after the show, but Bala doesn't know. "It didn't even occur to me to find out," she tells us.

An invitation to perform at the prestigious Edinburgh Festival of music and dance in 1963 followed. To Bala, the experience at

Edinburgh remains unforgettable. She had a heart problem and had been hesitant to make even the Tokyo trip but had been permitted, even urged, by physician-friend Dr. A. Srinivasan to go ahead and give her all. And that's what she did at Edinburgh. She danced every night for eight nights in a row and every night it was a different programme. It was not difficult for Bala to vary her presentation, for her repertoire is extraordinarily wide and rich consisting of five items of alarippu, in *chaturasram*, *trisram*, *khandam*, *misram* and *sankeernam*; nine jatiswaram pieces in six different talas; eight sabdams; thirteen varnams; ninety-seven padams and related songs for abhinaya; fifty-one javalis; and eight tillana compositions. Included in it are also songs from *Bhama Kalapam*, the whole of *Sarabendra Bhupala Kuravanji*, a number of Sanskrit slokas, padyas in Telugu and viruttam pieces in Tamil. Some other dancer may or may not top her score, but perhaps none will ever excel her in rendering such numbers as *Sivadeekshaparu* (Kurinji, Adi), *En palli kondeerayya* (Madhyamvati, Ekam), *Kalai tookki ninradum deivame* (Yadukulakambhoji, Adi), *Neelamayil vahanano* (Neelambari, Adi) *Sabapatikku* (Abhogi, Rupakam), *Jagadodharana* (Kapi, Adi), *Nannine dhyana* (Kanada, Chapu), *Muhattai kattiyē* (Bhairavi, Chapu), *Nadamadi tirinda* (Yadukulakambhoji, Khanda Chapu) and *Natanam Adinar* (Vasanta, Khanda Ata). Certainly, none is ever likely to best her in portraying *Krishna nee begane* (Yaman, Chapu). "I believe the place was sold out days in advance for each of the eight performances," she says, remembering those heady nights with unalloyed pleasure and a deep sense of satisfaction. "I felt deeply honoured, not only by the reception given at the Festival but also by the highly favourable notices published in the newspapers and magazines."

Observers and critics of dance in Great Britain were quick to notice and extol the artistry of Balasaraswati, but were not quite familiar with Bharatanatyam and couldn't fully appreciate its underlying tradition, its sophistication and its other salient features. They had similar difficulties with Carnatic music presented at the Festival by M.S. Subbulakshmi. "We can only admire her skill and artistry as she moves those exquisitely mobile and expressive hands with their long tapering fingers, certain that she never puts one finger wrong, but even with the aid of copious notes... most of her meaning must elude us," observed the writer for the *Scotsman* and added: "To the uninitiated, the various Ragas may remain a mystery, but the vivid facial expression, constantly changing and indicative of the Rasas or moods can be followed in any language." In the *Scottish Daily Express*, Clive Barnes, who later emigrated to America, wrote that the charm of her dancing was in its simplicity. He noted that Bala "made her hands wreath through the air like the unfolding of flowers." The reporter for the *Scottish Daily Mail* felt that Balasaraswati's performance "went some

addressing a substitute nattuvanar, the stepney. "Kannammal was advanced in years when I saw her perform," Bala adds, "but her dancing was like an offering to the gods."

Bala is in her element. As she talks, she is animated and gentle and she looks lovely. She proceeds to offer additional insights into the world — Bala's world — of Bharatanatyam. "Do you know how the *gajjai* — the anklets of bells — used to be selected? In those days, what was used to indicate pitch for the musicians was a bag-pipe-like instrument called *tutti*. It was a pitch pipe of sorts and when blown, it used to fill the place up with a fine sound. The bells for the anklets had to be in tune with the pitch of the *tutti*, that was the criterion for their selection. There had to be fifty bells for the right ankle, and a few more for the left. They were not nicely sewn into bands of cloth or leather as they are today, but merely strung together. To avoid being hurt, the dancer would tie a strip of cloth on first and then tie the *gajjai* on top of it."

The way the *gajjai* are put on today marks only a small and insignificant change from the past. A more striking and important change was brought about by Bala's guru, among others. Kandappa Pillai too had a hand in starting the practice of seating the orchestra — nattuvanar and the musicians — on the left side of the stage, or to the right of the dancer, during performance. Also, when Bharatanatyam — or Sadir as it was called then — was primarily a temple offering and before it became a formal theatrical event, it used to be performed all night long during religious festivals. The dancing would be preceded by an elaborate *melaprapti*, a calling of the dance syllables to the accompaniment of mridangam. When Bharatanatyam became an art form presented on the formal stage, Kandappa helped change this practice too. He cut down the length of the *melaprapti* and trimmed the duration of varnams which used to last as long as two hours. He also allowed the singing of Tiruppugazh during alarippu.

Bala is really conservative and doesn't hold too much for what usually goes on in the name of innovation. After describing some of the changes that took place during her days, she feels obliged to comment. "You know," she says, "you must understand why, in the old days, the nattuvanar and the musicians used to walk behind the dancer during a performance. The audience used to be positioned on all sides of the performer. There was no power amplification arrangement then and the dancer couldn't hear the musicians properly. Since the song and the rhythm must be heard by the dancer, the supporting cast used to move back and forth along with the dancer. It may present an amusing picture to you today but we shouldn't laugh at it. Our elders didn't do anything foolishly."

Bala then comments on *melaprapti*, describing it as serving the purpose of "tuning up" before a performance. "To be successful, the performer must be fully and properly attuned to pitch and rhythm."

Melaprapti prior to performance helped her to achieve this, by creating an atmosphere of proper alignment. Surely, it's one thing to enter the arena in this atmosphere and another where the performer enters it cold. I would say that, similarly, it is better to start dancing to a padam after listening to a perfatory raga alapana for a while."

As she had done before in her conversation with us, Bala again asserts that the music, the sahitya or lyric of the song and the movements of the dancer must all blend properly. Music is indeed very important in a dance recital, she repeats. She herself has been fortunate in this respect. Her mother Jayammal who sang for her was a fine musician and she had a resonant voice that could be heard clearly without any artificial amplification. She was so good that when she finished singing Saveri at one of Bala's recitals, a connoisseur who was present said: "If I were a singer, I would pay my respects to this lady and give up singing myself." Bala tells us about another incident. This occasion was a recital of Roshanara Begum, the Hindustani classical music exponent who later migrated to Pakistan. "Someone who was only a peon had been assigned to provide tambura accompaniment and he didn't know how to do it properly. The lady turned around in dismay time and again, not knowing what to do, I guess. My mother who had a taste for North Indian music as well, was in the audience, chewing paan as usual. She understood the situation, got up on the stage, took the tambura off the fellow's hands and provided sruti accompaniment to the Begum for the rest of her recital. Roshanara was immensely pleased but several vidwans commented when the recital was over that Jayammal had demeaned herself. My mother's reply was that at least in her next life she would like to sing with such perfect sruti alignment as the Begum had just done."

Another person who sang for Bala was Gnanasundaram. A native of Kanchipuram, he was also a very good singer. Brother Viswa, a talented musician too, usually played the flute at her recitals but sometimes sang when she danced padams.

Bala recalls that the music accompanying dance performances used to be different early in this century. The main instrument used then was the mukhaveena, a diminutive nagaswaram. A limited instrument, with a range of only an octave and a half, it used to be played at the high pitch of five *kattai*. It was later replaced by the clarinet which offered a sweeter tone. "Dhanammal liked it very much," says Bala. "There was a fellow called Balaraman who played it well. My grandmother used to go wherever he played it, using a rickshaw for conveyance. Balaraman used to play regularly for Mylapore Gowri Amma. I remember that it was a practice to wind a string around the instrument where its two parts were joined in order to prevent leaks. Sometimes, a great deal of time would be spent at a recital just adjusting the string!"

Viswa took up playing the flute because a flautist prepared by Kandappa Pillai didn't fit in properly, Bala explains. "As for

mridangam support at my recitals," she informs, "in the beginning, I had a man called Munuswamy providing it. We used to call him Appila because he had cheeks rosy like apples. His arangetram as a percussionist took place at the same time as mine as a dancer. Later on, my mridangam player was Kuppuswamy Mudaliar of Kanchipuram. An expert in rhythm, he was a wonderful performer. I don't think he ever played mridangam for anybody else but me."

Kuppuswamy Mudaliar still lives, very old and infirm. His memory has holes in it. When we visit with him in Kanchipuram and prod him, he rambles quite a bit but recalls a couple of incidents concerning Bala and her guru. On one occasion, he says, Ponniah Pillai, father of Kittappa Pillai and uncle of Kandappa Pillai, decided to offer a challenge to the latter who was known for his tala expertise. Following one of Bala's recitals, he said to her guru: "Ah, you have choreographed the numbers using *trisram*, *khandam*, and *misram*: I have composed a jatiswaram in *sankeerna nadai*. Can you choreograph an item using it and have it performed within a month?" Kandappa Pillai's response was: "Why not? Perhaps I can do it within a week!" And he did just that. He prepared the number — it was in Poorvikalyani — trained Bala in it and had her perform it during her next recital itself. Ponniah Pillai sent his son Kittappa Pillai as an observer and on receiving his favourable report, commented: "Oh, I knew he could do it."

Kuppuswamy Mudaliar tells the story with relish and then goes on to sing the jatiswaram and delineate some of the teermanams added to it by Kandappa Pillai. He is short of breath but doesn't miss a beat. He had played mridangam for Bala for some forty years and as she puts it, "his fingers used to talk up the teermanams."

Mudaliar remembers another incident, this one laced with humour. Bala and party had been to Jaipur for a recital. On the way back to Madras, the party had to change trains at a junction. Perhaps Kandappa Pillai was annoyed with Bala that night. When the time for changing the trains came, he got off and made the change, along with the rest of the orchestra, but didn't wake up Bala and Jayammal who were sleeping in another compartment. The two ladies, says Mudaliar, a smile wrinkling his face further, were taken by the train to someplace else and they had to undergo all kinds of difficulties before finding their way home.

We sense a wicked glee in Mudaliar's telling of the tale, for like many members of orchestras of dancers and musicians, he seems to nurse a grievance that he was not compensated adequately for his endeavours, though some would say that working with Bala was compensation enough.

There was another incident, this one indicating the presence of mind and the creative skills of Bala. She was dancing the Bhairavi varnam *Mohamana*. Kuppuswamy Mudaliar gave the mridangam a forceful

chop and the skin on the right side of the drum split. It took about half an hour to procure a replacement. During that time, Mudaliar just sat there but Bala continued dancing, holding to the line she was singing and offering variation upon variation. It was instant choreography at its best. She simultaneously thought up and performed new movements, offering ever new interpretations of the line.

Another incident is illustrative of another facet of Bala as an artist. She was performing at the Music Academy. In executing a difficult teermanam in swarajati in Husseini, she failed by a fraction of a second to finish on the beat. Without a moment's hesitation, she signalled to the orchestra and started repeating the teermanam. This time, she executed it perfectly, effortlessly and the sophisticated audience roared its approval, possibly expressing not only satisfaction with the repeated movement but also admiration for her artistic integrity.

The distraction occasioned by the memory of our visit to Kanchipuram is but momentary. Now Bala explains her approach to the singing of padams. "There's of course the lyric part of the padam but is that enough?" she asks. "The lyric must be sung in such a way, with embellishments, that the underlying swaras come to life. The musical aspect must not be overlooked. Otherwise, where's the soul?"

She proceeds to offer a demonstration, *Polati*. In how many ways can one address a woman. *Ri, ma, pa.. polati. Ma pa ma pa dha pa... polati*. She sings the swara to effect, revealing the soul of Saveri. Is this the way a loving nayaka calls his beloved? The sringara rasa is evoked instantly, most aesthetically, as she sings, her hands gesturing, her eyes conveying the bhava eloquently. Momentarily we grasp that the nayaka and the nayika are unable to part, to bid goodbye. *Polati eevuri dakapoyi vacchadani...* she repeats the phrase in so many different ways, offering a different nuance each time. Employing the *pataka hasta*, where all five fingers of the right hand are stretched and held together, she tilts her head ever so slightly and wipes the tears off her cheek and we see in our mind's eye tears rolling down. A different gesture now to portray the same aspect, the small finger of her right hand delicately brushing away a singly tear-drop. With a minimum of gestures, she conveys a maximum of emotion. Still sitting in her chair and her body hardly moving, she now employs the *pataka hasta* again to show the nayaka leaving and the nayika wiping her tears away. Finally, she adjusts the end of her sari over her shoulder and portrays the leavetaking again, this time using the pallav to show the nayika mopping her tears. Bala sings even while she demonstrates. She brings tears to our eyes. Right there in her own living room, seated on a chair, unadorned, frail from failing health, she offers glimpses of her great art. It is an experience to remember, not so easy to convey.

"You see, it is possible to interpret the words in so many different

ways," she says now, stopping her song. "I don't mean to say that only a padam offers scope for portraying emotions effectively. Nor do I say that only the sringara aspect is important. There is deep emotion as well in the songs of Pattinattar, Tayumanayar, Arunagirinathar and other saints. I feel inspired to hear their songs sung. My mother was inspiring when she sang a viruttam; she was a well-spring of creative interpretation. And my grandmother sang so many slokas!"

Back to grandmother. On one occasion, Dhanammal was seated in front at a recital of Bala's. She couldn't see, but was there to listen to the music and the sounds of the dancing feet. Bala started with a viruttam and sang the piece as she danced. Dhanammal was quick to take the cue and, falling in step, she sang too, to the great delight of the audience.

Bala recalls the incident and then adds: "But I must tell you this. I don't fool around with songs in languages I don't know. Thus I couldn't get interested deeply in Jayadeva's *Ashtapadi*. Unless you fully grasp the song, how can you portray it in abhinaya?" The corollary of this attitude is that what she takes up, she does thoroughly. And the artist in her does not go to sleep ever. "Even when I lie down tired, I'd be doing abhinaya in my mind, giving rein to my creative urges. There can't be any rest for an artist," she concludes.

Back to grandma again; for her, Dhanammal was the supreme artist. "She would play the veena every Friday," she notes. "This of course is known to many. But do you know that during Navaratri, she would have a bower of jasmine floweres made up, sit under it and play the veena. Agarbatti would add to the fragrance of the flowers but more fragrant than all of them was my granny's music. During Navaratri, her bed would be strewn with the soft petals of roses and other flowers. Her *supari* would be spiced with cloves, cardamom and saffron. She played the role of a goddess then. A goddess she was to the end."

Lakshmi, her daughter, reminds Bala that Dhanammal was sometimes referred to as the "fire box". "Oh that!" explains Bala. "My grandmother's grandmother Kamakshi Ammal and a gentleman known as Dare House Venkataswamy Naidu were good friends. My great-great-grandmother was quite adept in music; it was she who brought up Baldas. Naidu was a great patron of arts and artists. Baldas, I am told, used to perform for him on the veena. Baldas was blind, as was my grandmother in her later years. Young Dhanammal used to go to Naidu's house to listen to Baldas play. Somehow, Baldas would know it was she arriving and would greet her, saying *Ochinda aggipetta*, or ah, the fire-box has come. It was his way of acknowledging that Dhanammal was as quick to learn a song as a match-sick was to fame, in those days anyway."

Balasaraswati reverts to the subject of innovations and deplors trends which she finds distasteful. "These days, too much of the

rhythm element is brought into abhinaya, and there is a tendency to stress rhythm throughout any song. I don't like this. Rhythm is like a delicate thread. It must be strong, but shouldn't show obviously in the fabric of dance. Tala must be in the footwork, bhava in the face. Well, if someone doesn't have it this way, I can only say that it is unfortunate."

Then, smiling a little puckishly, she says: "The only explanation for the current practice of some performers who dance even to the Navagriha kritis of Dikshitar must be that the planetary configuration is not right. Perhaps they have been advised by astrologers to perform them!"

Viswa's presence during one of our visits with Bala gives us the cue to ask Bala about her several trips to America. It turns out that Bala's first visit in 1962, sponsored by the Asia Society in New York, had been undertaken to serve an appointment as Artist-in-Residence at the Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, where Viswa himself secured a teaching appointment later. Viswa had been to America in the late 1950's on a Fulbright Scholarship and he had taken the opportunity to introduce many Americans to the arts of India. As Artist-in-Residence, performing as well as teaching, Bala was now to pick up the thread.

Bala's classes at Wesleyan resulted first in an acquaintance and subsequently in a deep and lasting friendship with a young lady of considerable charm and means, Luise Scripps. Mrs. Scripps had prior training in ballet, and having heard of Balasaraswati's great artistry, she had come all the way from California to see her. Bala enrolled her as a student to the latter's surprise and delight. So taken in were Luise and her husband with Bala's dancing and personality that they established an institution called the American Society for Eastern Arts in California, just so Bala could teach in America and could be invited again. Bala did teach there and the Society sponsored a return visit to America during 1965-66, fitting in an European tour also en route.

While Luise travelled from the West Coast to the East to meet Bala, another young lady, Caroline Kay, hitchhiked all the way from New York to California to study with Bala. Now in Madras on a visit, Caroline tells us that Bala herself taught about ten students while Lakshmi took care of another fifty or so. Bala didn't speak English well, but she knew how to convey her instructions. Caroline remembers with awe her altogether brief learning experience under Bala. She subsequently became a dancing partner of Bhaskar (Roy Chowdhury), a Madrasi who settled down in New York to pursue a dancing career.

Again, while Luise was a friend newly made, well-known modern dancer Martha Graham was already a friend and admirer, having visited Madras earlier and seen Bala dance. During that visit, a couple of friends of Bala arranged a recital for the exclusive viewing benefit of Miss Graham. But there were others who were not sure that

Bharatanatyam would appeal to the great American dancer and hence they counselled Bala to restrict her programme to a bare ten minutes. This was also the advice of a Government Minister who was to attend. After dancing that long, Bala paused and asked the distinguished visitor if it was enough. Miss Graham asked her to continue saying, "I understand this art, I want to see more." Some who had tried to anticipate her departure sat down again. Bala danced for two hours and a half and at the end, Miss Graham asked her to go on, embraced her, and said: "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!" Bala was not carried off, but Miss Graham was carried away.

When Bala was in New York, Miss Graham could not receive her personally but she showed her appreciation and affection by sending a large bouquet of flowers and a huge basket of fruits and nuts to her room. Bala was deeply moved.

During that first visit to the U.S., Bala gave lecture-demonstrations at sixteen centres all over the country and gave recitals in the East as well as in the West. She opened her visit with an appearance at the Jacob's Pillow, in Massachusetts, where two renowned personalities of the American dance stage, Ted Shawn and his wife Ruth St. Denis, had been conducting a festival for many years. They were old and venerated figures. Bala drove the audience to wild enthusiasm with her performance and Shawn told the audience: "You are in the presence of greatness." One critic said it was a "unique experience," while another wrote that Bala's delicate and beautiful art is timeless and knows no frontiers."

Indians living in New York at that time felt proud of their heritage as they read with gladness in their heart the fulsome tributes paid to Balasaraswati in the New York *Herald Tribune* and New York *Times*. The dean of American dance critics at that time was Walter Terry who wrote for the Trib, - as the now defunct newspaper was referred to usually. In a review which has become famous for its striking opening words, he wrote:

"The most articulate forefinger in the world of dance made its American debut last evening at the Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival. It was a forefinger which, employing 2,000 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 forefinger belonged to Balasaraswati... Of course, Balasaraswati moved more than her forefinger.... All of her gestures, employing one or more fingers, the entire hand, the arms and the shoulders spoke musically, or when a story was to be conveyed, symbolically or explicitly as the situation demanded.

"I mention the forefinger specifically because it characterized the dancer's special approach to her art, an approach not based upon physical virtuosity but rather upon nuances, shading subtleties.

Because she is not flashy, the nearer one sits to the stage, the more affecting is her art, for then the exquisite details — pursing of the mouth, the flicker of an eyelid — are not lost.

“Balasaraswati truly... is a great actress-dancer whose purpose is to reveal the feelings of gods and of men and not merely startle the beholder.”

Terry provided an update in a brief comment he made on a recital Bala gave in New York three years later. “The Balasaraswati program,” he wrote, using American spelling, of course, “though presented with great simplicity (it could be said that it was not staged at all), was shrewdly arranged (the sequence, interestingly enough, is quite traditional). It was, in every respect, a fascinating evening of dance. One did not have to be a Bharatanatyam student to savour its beauties. One did not need to be able to translate every gesture — it was sheer heaven just to watch the dancer make mercurial but exact sculptures in space with her delicate fingers and rounded arms, and to observe her mobile face as she commented with a smile, the lift of an eyebrow, a frown, a glance of invitation upon her gestural sentences. One didn’t even need to know how to pronounce Balasaraswati in order to cherish the rare art of simple ‘Bala’.”

To be understood properly, Terry’s comment must be placed alongside of what Clive Barnes said in his report for the *Times* on the same recital. Barnes, who had found an important niche in American journalism after immigrating from the United Kingdom, wrote in part:

“Faced with an Oriental art, the average Westerner should speak with all proper humility of deep ignorance. We see and we like or we reject, yet with none of the instinctive authority, or cultivated knowledge, we can bring to our own cultural heritage. Yet a dancer such as Balasaraswati... makes nonsense of ethnic boundaries.... As her hands flutter round like doves on the mission of explaining some quite unlikely, and to Western eyes quite incomprehensible story, and her dimpled elbows work backward and forward with a businesslike simplicity, one sits back and without understanding is content to appreciate.”

Barnes’ comments on the problems faced by Westerners in understanding Bharatanatyam seem, on reflection, applicable to a sizeable segment of dance-watchers in India also.

Allen Hughes, who is still with the *Times*, wrote a report in 1962 on a dance demonstration and performance Balasaraswati gave at the famous Juilliard School in New York City. His comments are worth recalling at some length because he too examined Bala’s performance from the viewpoint of the American unfamiliar with the deeper and more intimate aspects of South Indian classical dance and also because he made some observations comparing Bharatanatyam and Western classical dance. He wrote, in part:

“On the face of it, [a dance demonstration and performance by a

performer from India] would scarcely seem noteworthy, for Bharatanatyam... is hardly a novelty in New York. Over the years we have seen a number of its exponents (including an American or two) in varied interpretations of the art. Until last week, however, we had not seen Balasaraswati here, and she makes all the difference.

"She has neither youth, beauty, svelteness nor slick theatricality to help her along. Her stage manner is anything but imperious; as she stands waiting to begin a dance, she is altogether unprepossessing. She may cast an inquiring glance at the little Indian orchestra seated crosslegged on a low platform at her right, push back a wisp of hair on her forehead, adjust a fold of her sari, or just stand there doing nothing and projecting nothing. She could be Mrs. Anybody from India.

"But then the music begins and she becomes Balasaraswati. It is as if a switch had been thrown and a powerful magnetic field was created around her. She extends an arm, her head and eyes follow its sculpted motion, her fingers are relaxed but precise in a characteristic gesture. Her face is animated with an expression of eager alertness.. The dance has begun. Balasaraswati is engaged in her art, and the beholder is engaged with her.

"It is said that in India, the observer of dancing is expected to approach it with intellectual understanding and emotional empathy. We of the West can hardly be expected to bring much of either to performances of Indian dancing. The traditions and practices of Bharatanatyam, for example, are centuries old and rooted in legends and mime symbols of which we can acquire only the most superficial knowledge even with considerable application. Furthermore, total intellectual mastery of these elements would never lead us into the state of emotional empathy the Indian might achieve.

"Thus, even when we feel we are fully engaged with Balasaraswati in the performance of her art, we are surely only grazing its surface. It may be that we respond to only the most superficial, unessential or irrelevant aspects of both the art and the performance. This need not deter us, though, from enjoying them as best we can in our relatively clumsy Western way.

"And clumsy is just about the way we feel when we see Balasaraswati's dancing. Bharatanatyam is a mosaic, an art built up of myriad tiny elements — each unassuming, almost ordinary, in itself. There is not one, however, that does not colour the whole; each fragment is precious and each enhances the others when all are put together with the logic and love of a dedicated performer.

"Contrasted with an art like this, much of our dancing seems big, vulgar and overwrought. It is as if we made mosaics for the myopic.

"Bharatanatyam is exactly the opposite. Indeed, Balasaraswati's interpretation of it is so intimate as to seem conversational....

"Balasaraswati's particular genius may lie 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. The spontaneous-seeming movement worked as a catalytic counterpart that both united and glorified the aural and visual components of the performance. Thus, incompletely comprehended though it was, Balasaraswati's art was full of aesthetic rewards."

On the West Coast of the United States also Bala's dancing made a great impact. Renee Renouf, a California-based ballet dancer and writer, was among those bewitched by Bala's art. A report filed by her appeared in May 1963 in *Thought*, a high-brow journal published in New Delhi in those days, in which she said:

"For the Westerner seeing her the first time, Balasaraswati's impact has the effect and force of an emotional hurricane following a period of unexpected calm. Whether he be ignorant or enlightened regarding the subtleties of Bharatanatyam, Balasaraswati engages the spectator's total being. When the barrage of sight, sound and feeling upon one's emotions and intellect ceases, calm returns, but it is the peace which comes from the same catharsis brought by Greek tragedy. The spectator leaves his seat fully aware he never will be quite the same individual he was before.

"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 in 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.

"But above all, Balasaraswati is a testimony to the wedding by love of womanhood and artistry, each nurturing and strengthening the other, transforming and refining the evanescent material of one's art and one's life into an increasingly transcendent channel of divine spirit. How many artistes can one claim to see within one's lifetime who submit themselves to this discipline, and who give the audience the privilege of witnessing its ever-growing, ever-deepening manifestation? All this within her art shines forth; beyond it, there is no need for self-assertion so common to the Western artiste or dancer; no self-aggrandizement because of talent; no manipulations for personal self-importance. Egotism and art have been inexorably separated.

Though the human and divine have interacted to mature the art and the artiste, personal tricks and foibles have long since been left behind, if indeed they ever existed. What remains is a warm, accepting, giving feminine spirit, whose serenity transforms its technical vehicle to such an extent that the uninitiated comes away from seeing her dance with the feeling that Balasaraswati has led them to the cathedral hidden away in the innermost corner of their hearts.

"Within my own Western heritage of ballet, I can say with joy I have seen Margot Fonteyn dance *Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake* and *Ondine*. I can also state I have seen Galina Ulanova dance *Giselle*. Now, following a decade of reading about the legend, I can humbly, gratefully say, I have seen Balasaraswati caress the earth with Bharatanatyam."

Balasaraswati made visits to the United States periodically, right into the late nineteen seventies. Each time, her performances were hailed and crowds consisting of old fans and newly curious flocked from near and far to see her dance. She was just a year short of sixty in 1977 and she was still dancing — and dancing to great effect. Why not? Ruth St. Denis had danced when she was in her eighties and Martha Graham also graced the stage in spite of a high calendar score. That year, Bala danced at the American Dance Festival at Connecticut College in New London and many were seen with tears smudging their cheeks following her rendering of *Krishna nee begane*. "The expressiveness of Balasaraswati's gestures, the depth of the emotions she registers and the concentration that prevades her figure all go beyond mere entertainment to suggest quiet ecstasy," wrote Anna Kisselgoff in the *New York Times*, reporting on the event. Kisselgoff, known for her preceptive comment on Indian classical dance, wrote further, referring to Bala as one of the supreme performing artists of the world: "In one flash, the sacred origins of Indian classical dance became clear. Perfectly modern sophisticates who know nothing about Indian dance begin to use words such as epiphany, spiritual, purity and sublime as they leave the theatre..."

This last remark is particularly interesting and noteworthy. Because, in the early decades of this century, the Indian public has come to view classical dance as profane rather than sacred, because of its close association with the devadasi community, to which Balasaraswati belongs. Following an interview with Bala, Kisselgoff herself wrote: "In the early twentieth century Indian classical dance had fallen into disrepute. A highly complex technique and dance form, rooted in religion, had become corrupted. The erotic metaphors at the core of Indian art that symbolize love of God were now expressed in literal, crude gestures. Dancing in general became associated with the Nautch girls, themselves associated with the world's oldest profession."

There is so much of dancing vulgarized in its aesthetic aspects presented today under the banner of Bharatanatyam, traditional or

innovated, that it seems surprising there should have been any disfavour shown towards this classical dance form in the past. Yet it is true that, in the early decades of the century, Bharatanatyam itself was frowned upon equally as the devadasi system. Moves to abolish the latter crystallized in a bill making it unlawful. Fortunately, there were no similar moves to do away with Bharatanatyam; there were, of course, many who disapproved of it but there were also individuals of prominence who sought the restoration or its practice as an honourable profession. Among these, credit must go mainly to Balasaraswati who showed that the evocation of the *sringara rasa* could be done beautifully and without in any way profaning the art; Rukmini Devi, who generally preferred to emphasize the *bhakti rasa* and who also applied her aesthetic sensibilities to strip away the vulgarities that had enveloped the art, such as the use of costumes which were ugly, garish or violative of the aesthetic sensibilities; and lawyer, stage actor and dance critic E. Krishna Iyer, who propagated the idea that there was nothing inherently sinful in the art of Bharatanatyam itself and towards this end not only learnt to perform Bharatanatyam but actually put on the clothes of a woman and gave dance recitals all over the South. Their efforts were aided, by the reawakening of the Indian public, as part of their general political awakening, to the country's great cultural heritage. Over the years, Balasaraswati has been heard to make remarks that suggest a certain resentment towards efforts — ill-conceived in her view — to "clean up the act" and towards the performers perceived by her as the end products of such moves. She has aired her views urbanely in important forums like the Madras Music Academy and the Tamil Isai Sangam, while being rather more blunt in private.

In her presidential address at the thirty-third annual conference of the Tamil Isai Sangam, delivered on 11 December 1975, Bala conveyed her views on *sringara rasa* quite elaborately. She said that *sringara* was pre-eminent in the Tamil dance tradition right from the beginning, with one aspect emphasizing the inner life and the other the outer life of man. Referring to those seeking to cleanse Bharatanatyam of its *sringara* element, she asserted that "there is nothing in Bharatanatyam which can be purified afresh; it is divine as it is and innately so." And she added with great emphasis: "The *sringara* we experience in Bharatanatyam is never carnal; never, never. For those who have yielded themselves to its discipline with total dedication, dance like music is the practice of the Presence; it cannot merely be the body's rapture."

Vulgarity, like beauty, is perhaps in the beholder's eye and this may explain why some musicians refuse to sing the *padams* cast in the *sringara* mould, like those of Kshetrappa. Another reason for muting the *sringara* aspect — and emphasising the *bhakti* aspect — might have been the desire to avoid the cutting edge of social disapproval, and

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present Bharatanatyam in a better or rather a more acceptable light. Regardless of the validity of the view strongly held and put forward by Balasaraswati, the reality of social attitudes had to be contended with and this is the perspective in which the efforts of those who may be called the purificators or cleansing agents must be seen. Yet Balasaraswati has not chosen to do so. To her, those who sought to replace sringara with bhakti have done so possibly because they did not have an adequate, experiential understanding of sringara. We recall her story of Dhanammal's intervention at one of Baby Bala's recitals when she asked the organisers to delete an item calling for adult experience and perceptions, saying that the child could not be expected to perform it with understanding. We recall too an incident in the story of Adi Sankara. When he was in Kashmir, he was challenged when he was talking about married life and asked how he could presume to speak on the subject knowledgeably since he was a monk. Sankara was struck by the justice of this question and, as the story goes, he entered the body of the then ailing Maharaja in order to gain first-hand experience of married life, and subsequently won the debate with Mandala Misra, his opponent, on this point too.

In private, Balasaraswati has been heard to refer to the style of Bharatanatyam emphasizing bhakti over sringara — a style that is purported to have gained ascendancy since the late thirties — as “brahminized dance”. In this context, it seems to us the word should be spelt with a lower-case *b*, for Balasaraswati seems to have used the term as an euphemism for “cleaned up” rather than in any narrow communal sense. Her descriptions perhaps reflect the observation that so many of today's Bharatanatyam performers belong to the Brahmin community but, in conversations with us, the pith of her remarks seems to be her conviction that only those who were part of the music and dance cultural heritage of devadasi families such as her own really “had it” in them to do proper justice to the great art. This is an attitude which perhaps has its analogue in the reaction of the Brahmins to suggestions that appointments to the posts of *archakas* or priests in temples may be more widely thrown open to those not belonging to *their* community, including perhaps Harijans. The typical reaction of the Brahmins to such a proposal is to ask: Are they — the others — really qualified to do so? Do they have proper knowledge of the agamas and the attitudes towards *achara* and *anushtana* which the Brahmins have obtained through centuries of tradition? Seen in this perspective, Balasaraswati's strongly held views on sringara in Bharatanatyam and the protagonists of the bhakti element seem rather more understandable.

Certainly Balasaraswati is not against bhakti. In fact dance to her is a sacred art, an offering to the gods. Thus it was a double tragedy from her point of view that, while the Anti-Nautch Movement dealt a severe blow to the delineation of the sringara aspect in Bharatanatyam

as it survived and developed in later years, the finally passed Act of 1947 — The Madras Devadasi's (Prevention of Dedication) Act — declared unlawful the performing of dance "by a woman with or without kumbaharati in the precincts of any temple or religious institution or in any procession of a Hindu deity..." With one stroke, the culminating legislation cut off the strong nexus that had existed between the temples and a community of artists dedicated to music and dance, thus closing down what had been a historic granary of the arts, particularly in the Tanjavur district. While there may have been social gains from this political act, the unique milieu in which the arts and the artists both thrived has vanished for all practical purposes.

For Bala, the legislation prohibiting the performance of dance in a temple by a woman assumed personal poignancy as well when, at a crucial time in her life and career, she wished very much to perform at the Tiruttani temple, as an offering to the presiding deity, Murugan. Bala recalls the experience vividly.

"It was a time when I did not have many invitations to perform. One day, Konnakole Pakkiri Pillai told me go dance at the Tiruttani temple in Murugan's *sunnidhi* or presence, implying that this offering would help me to overcome the difficulties I was facing then. As a result of his suggestion, I got it firmly fixed in my mind that I should offer my art as a tribute to Lord Muruga at Tiruttani.

"However, because dancing in temples was now unlawful, I was feeling very unhappy that I couldn't fulfil my vow. It was then that Dr. A. Srinivasan, that wonderful man, told me when I described my unhappiness to him just to go ahead and perform at the temple. When I told him I doubted I would be permitted to do so, he smiled and replied that no one would know if I performed the hastas when the priest was conducting the service."

Bala warms up now, the trace of remembered anguish that had been visible on her face disappearing. "We went to Tiruttani. We bought a large garland of roses and other materials for performing *abhishekam*, the ritual anointment of the idol. When we offered these to the officials concerned, we were told that the garland couldn't be used because it had zari or tinsel on it. So we requested them to place it at the Lord's feet. When the priest was offering worship, I quietly executed dance gestures with my hand, softly singing the song *Neelamayil vahanano*. Yet I was dissatisfied. The high noon service was over and everyone left, that is, everyone but me and three other members of my party, all family members. We didn't feel like leaving the place. The watchman came along and said it was time to lock up the premises and suggested that we come again in the evening. We gave him ten rupees to fetch a packet of camphor for *deepa aradhana*. We had somehow to get him out of there since I had to perform the dance without being found out by the police!

"Before the watchman could return, I quickly put on my *gajjai* — this

is very important, you know — I danced the Tiruppugazh number called *Koorvale pazhittha vizhiale*. I don't quite remember what else I performed, but I danced spiritedly, possessed by a silent prayer to Murugan: *Swami, unakke naanum arpanam, en kalaiyum arpanam*: Lord I offer to you humbly both myself and my art! It is a great privilege to have been able thus to perform a dance as an offering to God, under the holy flagpole, on the full moon day. He, Murugan, accepted my offering!

"You know, shortly after this, my career began to prosper again. All the important events in my life took place only after my religious offering at Tiruttani."

It must be true, what she says. Following the fulfilment of the vow it was that she came into limelight again and honours were bestowed on her. Appearances in New Delhi and other places in India at frequent intervals. Visits to Japan, the United Kingdom; Europe and the United States. The Sangeet Natak Akadami Award; the Presidential award of Padma Bhushan; the honorary doctoral degree conferred by the Rabindra Bharati University; the higher Presidential award of Padma Vibhushan; the Sangita Kalanidhi title conferred in 1973, for the first time on a dancer, by the Madras Music Academy; the Isai Perarignar title granted by the Tamil Isai Sangam in 1975; the honorary degree of Desikottama (Doctor of Literature) given by Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in 1978; and others.

But the "title" she has cherished the most is none of these, Balasaraswati insists. "What I am most proud of," she says, "is the fact that I am the grand-daughter of Dhanammal."

In *The Other Mind*, Beryl de Zoete has described Bharatanatyam as "surely one of the most difficult in the whole repertory of dance and, if perfectly danced, one of the most beautiful," and added: "Without an inner life of some intensity it is impossible adequately to render the profound beauty of this extraordinary dance, and one must admit that there are very few indeed whose dancing of it gives real pleasures."

Balasaraswati's life and career have offered a brilliant confirmation of this statement. □□

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