

Bala

“Almost everyone is either a grandchild of Veena Dhanammal or a cousin of the danseuse Balasaraswati”, wrote the humorist Shankar in Shankar’s Weekly. Dhanammal was a musical colossus, a legend in her lifetime, and her daughter’s daughter Bala, a world celebrity herself, was proudest—ironically, in the light of Shankar’s comment—of being known as Dhanammal’s granddaughter. Shankar Pillai was only making fun of musicians and dancers cashing in on faked kinship with either the grandmother or the granddaughter.

I had the pleasure of meeting Shankar Pillai at a dinner hosted in his honour at Hyderabad some twenty-five years ago. On the point of being introduced to Shankar, I surprised him—and my host as well—by saying: “Sir, I plead guilty on both counts; I happen to be a grandson of Dhanammal and a first cousin of Bala.”

Shankar was a great admirer of Bala—and only Bala—as a dancer but he could never condone her indifference to costume, particularly the floppy pyjamas

which had never been laundered or pressed with hot iron. He therefore caricatured Bala as a short, fat dancer with Chinese pigtail and loose pyjamas. Bala treasured the caricature but never bothered to change her ‘style’ or rise against traditional untidiness. She shared the joke with a number of her fans. She had once before been described as an elephant (Bala had put on weight then) to an enthusiastic visitor, Beryl de Zoete, who had come a long way to see her dance. Then too Bala had reacted with her wonted sense of humour: “Indeed I am Yanaisaraswati”—yanai being Tamil for elephant.

Bala could be as hilarious and frolicsome as the puckish Krishna she featured in mime. There was a



Courtesy: Shankar Pillai

difference of twenty years between us but such disparity never mattered when brothers and cousins got together, pooling family resources to play the fool.

Narasimhulu, the vocalist who lent lustre to Bala's dance as her chorister, had to be cured of his mannerisms when he was being coached and rehearsed. He had the habit of shutting his eyes tight while singing and making a peculiar sucking noise as though he had bitten on hot chillies. The *modus operandi* for reforming him turned out in practice to be third-degree torture. Every time he sucked, Bala would administer a hard blow on his thigh and conclude the 'cure' by pinching the flesh till he almost bled.

Viswa meanwhile would place matchsticks under Narasimhulu's eyelids to keep the "umbrella open".

As the eldest cousin and a capable interpreter (in English) it was my privilege to escort Bala to the All-Bengal Music Conference in Calcutta where Uday Shankar's appreciation paved the way for her worldwide fame.

Rabindranath Tagore was a distinguished guest and the first-ever performance of Bharatanatyam in Calcutta drew a full house. In the confusion customary of large gatherings, Bala and her interpreter were borne apart, and while trophies were being distributed by Tagore to winners in the music competitions, Bala heard her name being called. The announcements in Bengali were unintelligible and young Bala,

then a sweet sixteen, raced up the stage to receive her prize. But there was no prize for her—the announcement had only been of her arrival at the venue. The organisers were embarrassed and Bala had to beat a hasty retreat, abashed and confused.

An occasion I recall was the meeting of Bala and the celebrated Kuchipudi dancer Vedantam Satyanarayana playing Satyabhama (Krishna's consort) in Bhama Kalapam at the Annamalai Hall in Madras in 1976. During a pause in the performance, Satyanarayana entered the crowded auditorium to greet Bala and she took the opportunity to request him to perform Manduka Sabdam, though both were well aware that the dance piece was out of context. He was to meet her request—and gladly—at the conclusion of the dance-drama, but the curtains had already been drawn! The two celebrities then forced the curtains apart, much to the amusement of the gathering, and certainly their own. An exquisite performance followed.

Bala treasured among her 'trophies' the occasion when her grandmother Dhanammal, in the audience at Bala's performance at Soundarya Mahal in the George Town area of Madras, lent a helping hand as chorister. Bala was miming to her own rendition of a hymn by the Tamil saint Tayumanavar but, half-way through the song, her memory let her down. Never one to let her

granddaughter down, granny Dhanammal quickly stepped into the breach and picked up the song where Bala had left it.

There appeared several guardian angels when Bala was swimming against the current of social prudery, the crusade against the 'vulgarity' of Bharatanatyam. She was in dire need of support—moral and financial. T.K.

Chidambaranatha Mudaliar, the great Tamil savant, and Kalki Krishnamurti, then editor of the weekly Ananda Vikatan, were among those who stood by her through thick and thin. They were however not happy about Bala 'wasting her time' on hour-long, or longer, Varnams—pieces de resistance of the Bharatanatyam repertoire. Neither Bala nor her mother could be persuaded to depart from tradition and cut the varnam short.

Sankaranna, as Bala called her eldest cousin, treasures among his

trophies a letter from Bala with the admonition: "Hands off. You know nothing of Bharatanatyam and you admit it yourself. How dare you meet the editor of Sruti and brief him about me and my dance?" The letter tied my hands, but the editor of Sruti found a way to 'persuade' Bala to cooperate. Sruti staffers started interviewing Bala's guru's son Ganesan, her accompanists and others who had worked with her or known her, to collect material for a feature the magazine wanted to prepare. Bala sent word to all of them to stop talking but then agreed to talk to Sruti staff herself. Several sessions led to the most timely profile which appeared in two issues of Sruti around the time she passed away. I am glad to offer this profile to the readers of this journal, along with other items pertaining to Bala's life and career.

SANKARAN
Guest Editor

The Bharatanatyam recital is structured like a Great Temple: we enter through the gopuram (outer hall) of alapam, cross the aranam (inner hall) of alapam, then the mandapa (great hall) of alapam, and enter the holy precinct of the deity in the aranam. This is the place, the space, which gives the dancer expansive scope to revel in the rhythm, mood and music of the dance. The aranam is the continuum which gives ever-expanding room to the dancer to delight in her self-fulfilment by providing the fullest scope to her own creativity as well as to the tradition of the art. The aranam now follows. In dancing to the padams, one experiences the containment, cool and quiet, of entering the sanctum from its external precinct. The expanse and brilliance of the outer corridors