

# GLEANINGS from THE SOUTH

By GOVIND VIDYARTHI

THE first of its kind to be held in South, the Folk Dance Festival organised by the Madras State Sangeet Nataka Sangham at Tanjore was significant in many respects. Tanjore has been a seat of culture for centuries past. The birth place of modern *Bharatnatyam*, Tanjore has produced artists and scholars of wide-renown. The rulers of Tanjore have been great patrons of art and culture, especially the Maratha King Sarfoji, himself an eminent scholar and musician. A visit to the Saraswathi Mahal Library and the museum inside his palace is enough to convince one of the amazingly wide range of this ruler's interest in everything pertaining to art and culture. A large collection of rare manuscripts on music, dance, architecture and many other subjects are treasured in the library while the museum contains good many varieties of bronze and stone statues, musical instruments, etc.

The Folk Dance Festival was held inside the palace walls amidst these relics of the past. For three days the whole palace seemed to have awakened to its past glory, the numerous bronze and stone statues in the museum seemed to dance and the musical manuscripts in the library seemed to hum.

Late in the night one day when the programme of the day was over, Rajaram Raja Sahab, the senior descendant of King Sarfoji, was so inspired by the reveries of the past glory of his family that he led us to the museum and pointed out to a beautiful bronze image of Chakkarathalavar and said: "if you strike at the various limbs of the figure you will get the sound of the seven notes." So thrilled was Prof. Sambamurthi that he immediately set about discovering different notes while I made a recording of the sound. The Raja Sahab informed me that many more wonders lie scattered about all over the land formerly ruled by his family. He mentioned, in particular, the stone steps in front of a temple in Darasuram near Kumbhakonam.

To revert to the Folk dance, a rich fare was served at the Festival. Participants came from

various parts of Tamilnad as also from Kerala. The items presented included Kavadiattam, Karakamattam, Pavaikkoothu, Oyilattam, Terukkoothu, Puraviattam (Dummy Horse) and Kummi.

The Kavadi is an arched wood with cloth work and a short wooden base rod connecting the two ends of the arch. It is generally carried by devotees of Lord Muruga when they go to the temple. The dancer displays amazing feats of skill in balancing and moving a Kavadi all over his body without the support of his hands.

Karakam is another invocatory dance performed to propitiate Mariamman and other village deities. The dancer in this case was a young girl who balancing the *Karakam*, decorated mud pots, on her head danced to the deafening sound of indigenous instruments.

*Pavaikkoothu* is a kind of crude shadow play. It was very popular in Tamilnad among a section of the people. Now this art is surviving only in Kerala. The performers



Karakam dance

manipulating a few dolls against an oil lamp tried to depict a story.

*Oyilattam* is a very popular community dance in Tamilnad. *Oyilattam* is performed during the festivals in village temples. The dancers are trained by a teacher known as *Vadyar* who leads the dance. Their themes include the eternal love story of *Murugan* and *Valli*. Incidentally like the *Radha-Krishna* legend in the North, *Murugan-Valli* legend is the most popular theme of folk dances and songs in Tamilnad. *Murugan* is *Shanmukha*, the son of *Siva*.

*Terukkoothu* is a street drama popular in most of the cities. The performers came from *Kumbhakonam* and staged the story of *Ramayana*.

The tradition of Dummy Horse dancing is an ancient one in Tanjore. Unlike its counterpart in Rajasthan known as *Kutchighodi*, Tanjore dancers stand on short stilts and perform most of the complicated steps of classical dances while at the same time interpreting the theme by hand gestures and facial expressions.

*Kummi* and *Kolattam* are generally danced by women. Keeping an oil lamp in the centre they sing and dance round it clapping their hands. The songs are on the life of *Krishna*.

The festival featured a few folk songs and dances of Kerala such as *Vanchipattu* (Boatman's song) and *Ottamtullal* the depiction of a story in dance, performed by one person. It is noted for its gorgeous costumes and make up and the dancer sings and interprets the story in gestures and facial expressions.

During the three days of the folk dance festival I filmed and photographed all items and recorded their music. With the help of *Shri E. Krishna Iyer*, *A. N. Kalyanasundaram* and *P. Sundararajan* and the enthusiastic co-operation of artists I recorded various forms of folk music of Tamilnad.

## TIRUVAIAR

A few miles away from Tanjore city is *Tiruvaiar*, where lies the *samadhi* of the Saint Musician *Tyagaraja*. Like the countless millions who preceded me, I went there to pay my homage. Situated on the banks of the sacred *Kaveri* river the simple structure on the *samadhi* stood out in sharp contrast to its picturesque surroundings. Devotees of this great composer can be counted in millions. Yet, this *samadhi* was built by a *Devdasi*,

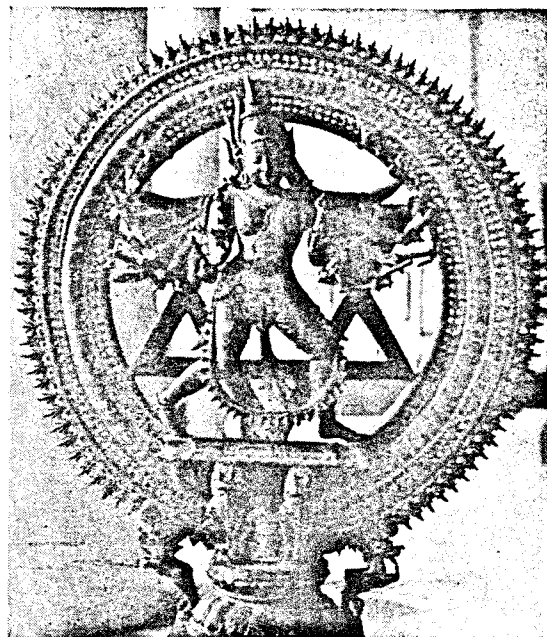


*Sundar Murthy in Dummy Horse Dance.*

*Bangalore Nagaratnamma*, who was a reputed dancer and singer at the *Mysore* palace. After leaving the palace she came to *Tiruvaiar* and spent every pie she had; sold all her jewellery and even utensils to build this monument. How aptly did *Sangeet Kalanidhi Shri Vasudevacharya* describe her in his reminiscences: "Though it springs from mud, the Lotus forms the coveted offering to the gods."

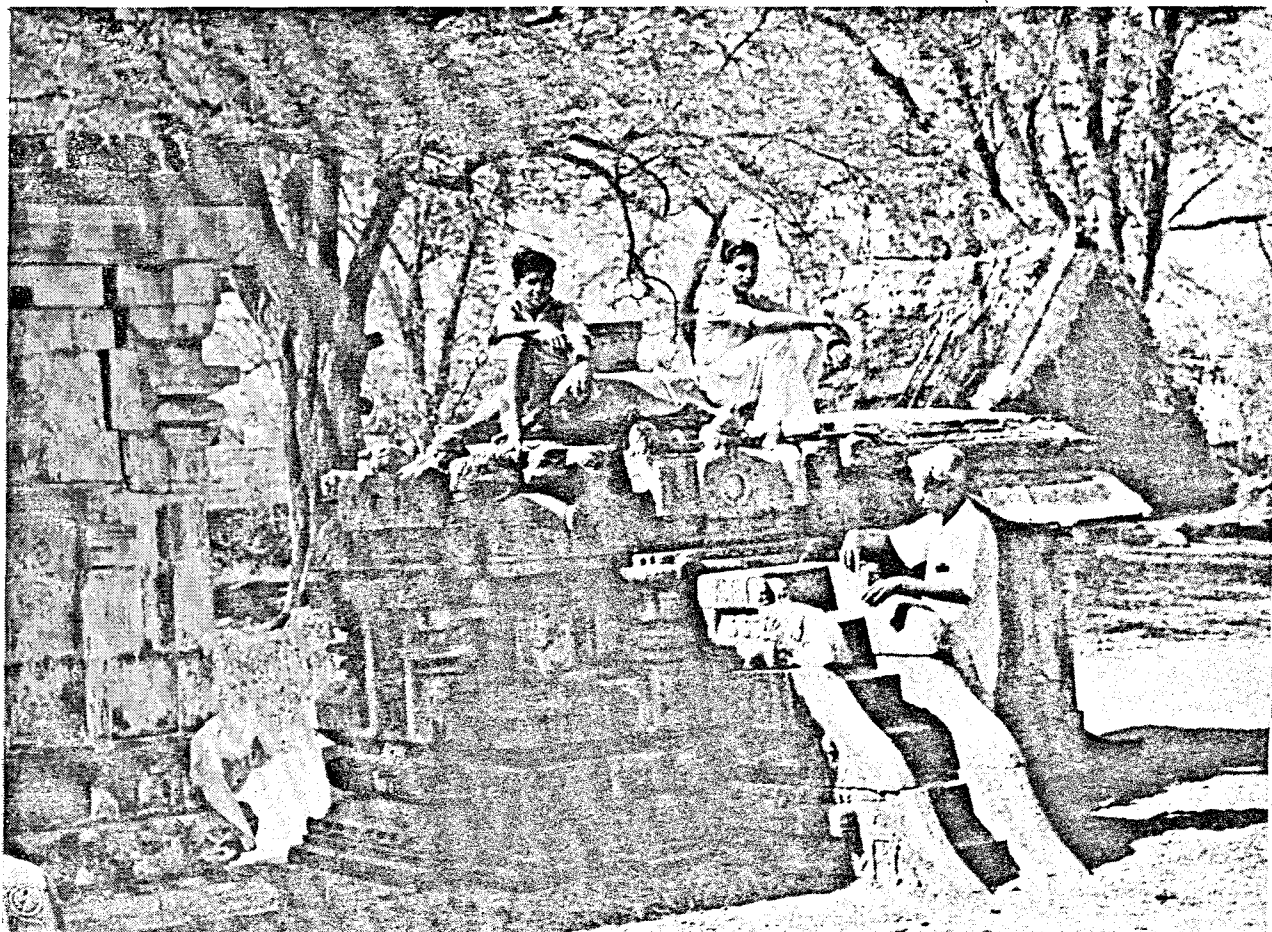
From Tanjore I set out for *Darasuram* where the granite steps of the temple have been sounding musical notes for about a thousand years. I was privileged to have the company of *Shri A.N. Kalyanasundaram* of *Kumbhakonam*. An artist and an art connoisseur, *Shri Kalyanasundaram* had been a stalwart in the campaign for the revival and popularisation of *Bharatnatyam*. His wife *Bharat Kalanidhi Smt. Bhanumati* has been a renowned exponent of *Bharatnatyam* along with her sister, the late *Varalakshmi*. But now she has given up dancing. Her daughter, *Mallikai*, is an accomplished dancer but she too does not want to dance. So strong is the feeling of the *Devdasis* to keep away from their family tradition! However, *Smt. Bhanumati* was kind enough to sing a *Tillana* and a few other songs for my recording. *Shri Kalyanasundaram* led me to

s a r g a m  
i n  
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*Bronze Statue of Chakkarathalavar*

*Stone Steps of Darasuram*



Darasuram and helped me record the music.

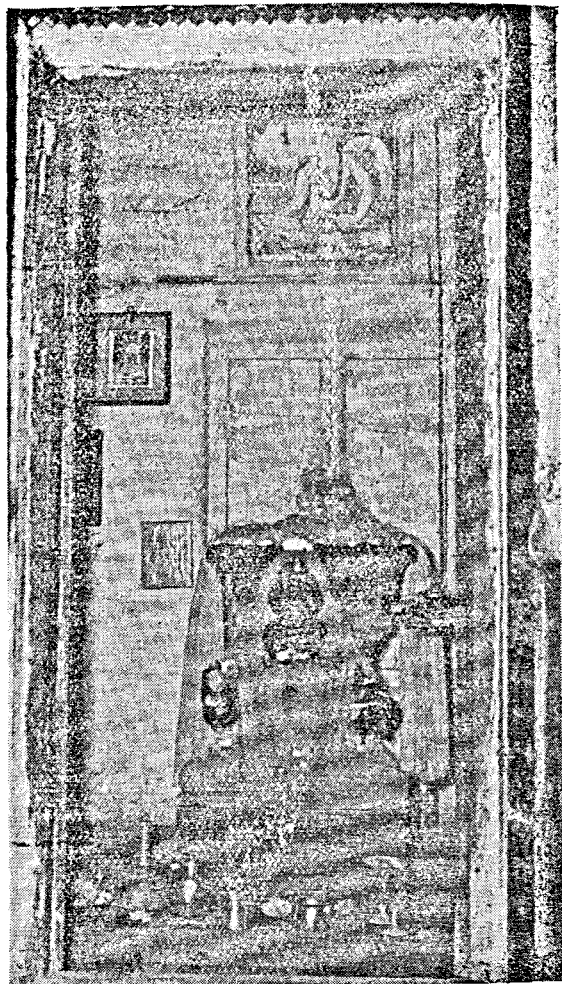
Then we made for Kumbheswara Temple where is treasured a rare piece of musical instrument—a stone *Nagaswaram*. Unfortunately the only musician who could play on it was not available and I could not record any sound of it.

## MELATTUR

MELATTUR is a village about twenty miles from Tanjore where the tradition of *Bhagwat Mela* is preserved. It is a dance-drama, akin to *Kathakali* of Kerala. It is said to have originated in the days of the Naik rulers of Tanjore. It is said that after the destruction of the Vijayanagaram Empire, the artists at the court had dispersed and many families of artists and scholars were invited by the Naik rulers of Tanjore who gave them a grant of six villages to stay and sufficient land to live on so that they could continue their cultural pursuit. Melattur is one such village. Melattur Venkatarama Sastri, a senior contemporary of Sri Tyagaraja composed twelve dance-dramas based on mythological themes. These dance-dramas used to be enacted every year in these villages where people from far and wide would gather.

The loss of State patronage and the general apathy among the people had brought this art almost to the point of extinction and it would have been long dead and gone had it not been for the efforts of a scholar Shri Balu Bhagawathar of Melattur who revived it.

From Ayyampet Station, Dr. Raghavan of the Madras University and I got into bullock carts and after a memorable journey of about three hours reached Melattur village, something like an Aryan colony mainly inhabited by Brahmin families. Most of the descendents of the scholarly artistes have now gone out in search of employment. But they were back to take part in the *Mela*. *Prahlada Charitam*, one of the best plays of Venkatarama Sastri noted for its high philosophic content and classical Karnatic music, was on the boards for the inauguration. After an illuminating talk by Dr. V. Raghavan, the play opened under the direction of Sri Balu Bhagawatar. A small stage was set up in the lane in front of Sri Lakshminarasimha Swamy Temple and the



*Tyagaraja Samadhi*

whole village watched the play squatting on the ground.

Amidst the hum and buzz of the eagerly waiting crowd the *Konanki* was sung when a character more like a Buffoon came on the stage moving up and down. Then a bowl containing water was passed round the musicians and they were garlanded by the organisers.

After an instrumental prelude, *Todaya-mangalam* and *Tirmanam* were sung followed by a *Shabdam* on *Prahlad Charitam*. It was followed by a *Ganesh Vandana* when an actor with a mask of Ganesh came on the stage and sat on a stool in the centre.

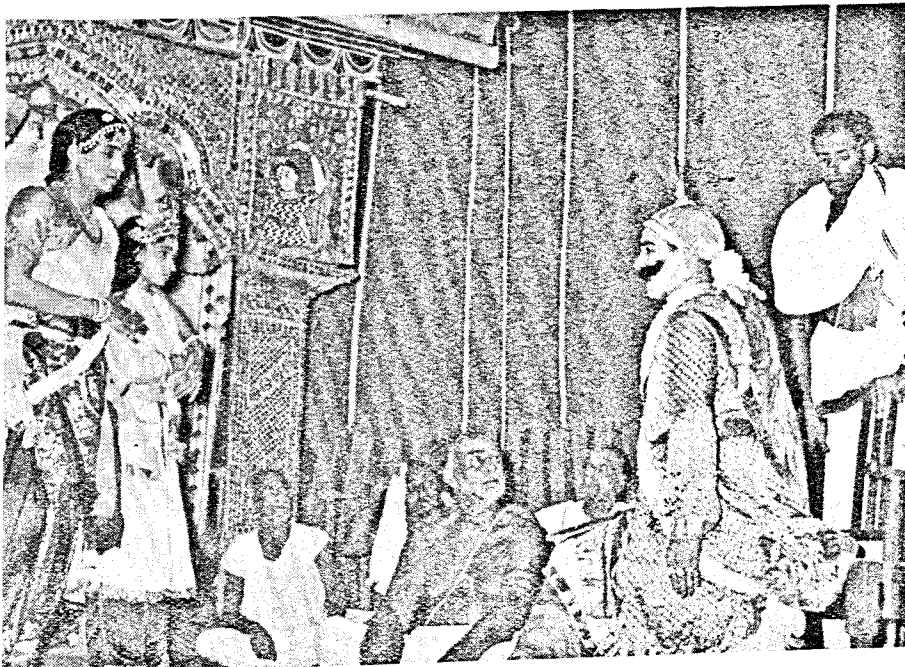
Then the story began with a *Kattiam* entering the stage, and heralding the entry of



**Bhagwat**

**Mela**

*Scenes from Prahladacharitam.*



*Hiranya Kasipu.*

Hiranya Kashipu. Hiranya Kashipu entered with two attendants holding his hand and danced to the accompaniment of a song called *Patrapravesha Daru*. His wife Lilavati entered the stage. Her entry was marked by a *Tiranokku*, as in *Kathakali*. Then Prahlada entered, dancing to the *Patrapravesha Daru*. Thus the entire story was enacted. The story was interspersed with comic characters who provided room for mirth and merriment among spectators.

While the dialogue and the songs of the drama are in Telugu, the language used by the comic characters is Tamil, which is understood by the audience, hence the vociferous welcome accorded to these characters. The drama reaches its serious and awe-inspiring climax when Narsingh enters the scene. The person enacting this part has to fast on that day and the mask worn by him is kept near the idol inside the temple. A few minutes before the entry of this character, the mask is brought out of the temple with solemn ceremonies and when it is placed on him he gets possessed with baffling strength and vitality. When the drama ends he is taken round the temple by several people controlling his frenzy and after the mask is removed he collapses and comes round only after a few hours.

In many respects the *Bhagawat Mela* resembles a *Kathakali* performance, the main difference, apart from the costumes, lies in the fact that in *Kathakali* the actors do not speak or sing while in the *Bhagawat Mela* they do.

Besides recording the whole programme on the stage I recorded separately a few songs of *Bhagawat Mela* in some of the rare *ragas* like *ahiri*, *Ghanta*, *Paras*, etc. sung by Shri Balu Bhagawatar and Vidwan Subbaiah.

Shri Balu Bhagawatar and Shri Swaminathan enacted a few scenes of the play the next day for me to shoot in colour.

## CHIDAMBARAM

CHIDAMBARAM, the heart of the universe where the Cosmic Dancer is said to have danced, has been a place of pilgrimage for artistes and art lovers alike. The dance poses engraved on the walls of Chidambaram temple had been a great attraction to me and in addition to filming and photographing them Nirmalaji had asked me to record also the enchanting music of the temple sung at the

time of the *Arati* in the evening. From Melattur I went to Chidambaram and met Sri Swarnavenkata Dikshitar, to whom I had a letter of introduction from Dr. V. Raghavan. The fabulous temple of Nataraj at Chidambaram is privately owned by three hundred families of priests, known as *Dikshitaras*, who form a trust and elect a Committee to manage its affairs.

Swarnavenkata Dikshitar, a musician, composer and scholar, was extremely nice, and when I informed him of the purpose of my visit, arranged for me to enter the temple when it was closed to the public and do shooting and photography. He was fasting as it was his turn to perform the Puja on that day. In spite of that he volunteered to sing, for my recording, the songs sung in the temple. He also invited me to witness the evening Puja and before he entered the sanctum, arranged for me to take more pictures if I so desired.

The elaborate rituals of evening Puja at Chidambaram cannot be adequately described. Amidst myriads of glittering lights a continuous stream of priests move in and out with offerings in their hands. The sanctum is all gold and the golden image of Nataraj shines radiant while the throng of devotees outside slap their faces in atonement and pray:

“O Lord of the dance, who calls by beat of drum all those who are absorbed in worldly things, and dispels the fear of the humble and comforts them with His love divine; who points with His uplifted Lotus foot as the refuge of salvation; who carries the fire of sacrifice and dances in the Hall of the Universe, do Thou protect us!”

## MYLAPORE

### GOURI AMMA

MY assignment in Madras included meeting that grand old lady of *Bharatnatyam*, Smt. Gouri Amma of Mylapore. I had heard her name mentioned in reverence by Smt. Balasaraswathy when she was honoured with the Akademi Award.

This queen of *Bharatnatyam*, who had held undisputed sway over the hearts of dance lovers for a long time, is now living in obscurity in a hut near the Tiruvalluvar Koil in Mylapore. Her family had been attached to the Mylapore temple. On the plot of land



## DANCE POSES OF CHIDAMBARAM TEMPLE





Balasaraswathy  
and Gouri Amma



allotted by the temple she had built a house for herself and had lived in peace and comfort. But with the abolition of *Devadasi* system in the temple, her family property and house were confiscated and she was turned out in the streets. Now she resides in a hut in an obscure place, old and partially blind, under the shadows of starvation. She is out early in the morning almost groping her way for miles to give tuition for a paltry sum of money. Yet such is the sense of dignity of this great lady that she would never stretch her arms in front of her disciples.

Bala had promised to take me to Gouri Amma. We set out one early morning to meet her. Many are the anecdotes about this lady that Bala related on the way. The celebrated Veena Dhanam used to sing for this lady to perform *Abhinayam*. Bala as a young kid used to go to her performance and come home and imitate her. It was only at the insistence of Gouri Amma that Bala was

## GOURI AMMA



allowed to learn dancing, which has meant a departure from her family tradition of music.

We reached Tiruvalluvar Koil street at about 8 in the morning. But Gouri Amma was already away.

From the neighbours we gathered that she had gone to teach a certain young actress who resides about three miles away. We went to the area and after a long search reached the house only to be told that Gouri Amma had left for another place, at a distance of a few miles again. We turned our car, determined to find her, and we finally succeeded. Wearing a black sari Gouri Amma was coming towards us walking with majestic gait. Bala was once again the child before her and with child-like insistence dragged her into the car. Later in the evening, in Bala's house, she performed *Abhinayam* for me to film and photograph. Bala sang for her while Jaimmal sat by, admiring the performance of this queen. I must confess here that I was so engrossed in the *Abhinayam* of Gouri Amma that I did not realise that I had shot two hundred feet and exposed five rolls of film.

While in Madras, I met yet another stalwart, Shri Vedantam Lakshmi Narayan Sastri, the greatest living exponent of *Kuchipudi* dancing. *Kuchipudi* is a village near Masulipatnam where about five hundred years ago a style of dance-drama, now well-known as *Kuchipudi* dance was evolved. The scholars and dancers known as *Bhagawatulu* introduced the codified forms of *Nritya* and *Natya* to the popular Shiv-Leela dance forms and interpreted stories from Bhagawata Purana. These scholarly exponents of *Kuchipudi* dances were hot favourites at the court of Vijayanagaram. It was these *Bhagawatars* who having settled in Tanjore after the collapse of the Vijayanagaram Empire, organised there what is known as *Bhagawatmelas*.

But the place of origin of this dance-drama, *Kuchipudi* has been keeping alive the tradition.

Vedantam Lakshminarayan Sastri, an eminent scholar and an authority on this style, had just dropped in at Balasaraswathy's house. For years he had been a friend of the family and had also been a teacher of Bala. A very interesting discussion followed his visit. His dissertation on *Natyashastra* and also on literature and its interpretation in *Abhinayam* showed his amazingly alert mind and a penetrating insight into the intricacies of art. I am happy to say that I was able to record on tape a major part of this conversation.



Vedantam Lakshminarayan Sastri

I wanted to take a few photographs. But the octogenarian savant put it off for another day. He had not had his shave that day! My idea was not only to photograph him but see him performing and if possible have a filmic record of him. So we went to the place where he was staying. Bala had promised to make him dance and then I must seize the opportunity. While we were seated in his compound Bala started singing a favourite *sloka* of the old man which he had taught her and lo the old man began interpreting the ideas in gestures and facial expressions; slowly he got up and started dancing, until he was tired and then he ran towards that mischievous disciple of his with a threatening gesture asking her to stop singing. Needless to say that my camera recorded everything including the last detail.

## MYSORE

**F**OLLOWING the tradition established by Hoysalas and Vijayanagaram rulers Mysore rulers have been great patrons of learning and culture. A galaxy of musicians, dancers and scholars has adorned the court of Mysore. There was a time when outstanding artists from other parts of the country considered it a great honour to be able to perform at the palace. In course of time Mysore had developed a distinct style in dance and to some extent in music. Mysore musicians like Veena Sheshanna, Veena Subbanna and Bidaram Krishnappa had attained in their time country-wide name and fame. A contemporary of theirs, Asthan Vidwan Sangeet Kalanidhi

Shri Vasudevacharya, received the Akadami Award in 1955.

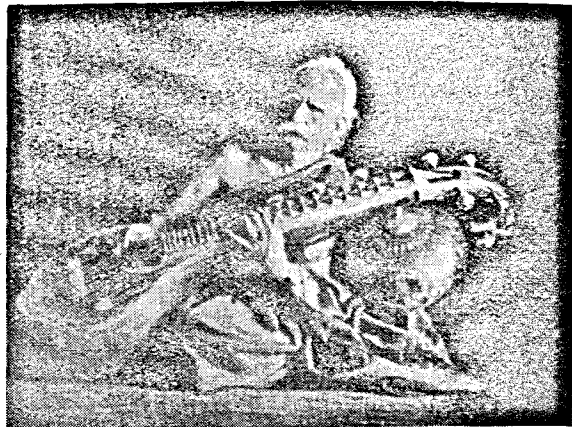
In dancing, too, Mysore has been able to preserve a style of its own, known as the Mysore School of *Bharatnatyam*. An outstanding exponent of this style in recent times was Natya Saraswathi, Smt. Jetty Tayamma. Very little is known outside about the music and dance style of Mysore. Nirmalaji had asked me, therefore, to go to Mysore and collect whatever details were available on these subjects.

From Madras I went to Bangalore where Miss Maya Rao introduced me to a number of artists, and prominent individuals working in the field of culture. Vidwan A. Subbarao, a well-known disciple of Bidaram Krishnappa, gave me a recording of his *guru's* style of music. With his help, I was able to have a specimen recording of Veena Sheshanna's style from Smt. Tirumale Rajamma.

Specimens of Veena Sheshanna's style were also recorded from his grandson Shri Chandrasekharaiyah and Shri Swaramurthy. I also recorded Shri Chintalapalli Ramachandra Rao and Shri N.L. Narayana Swamy Bhagawatar.

With the help of the State Adult Education Committee I visited a village called Shivanahally and filmed an interesting folk dance called Patta Kunita which is performed at the time of the annual festival at the temple in the village. The dancers hold aloft long poles with a kind of lace wrapped round it; the principal dancer holding a richly embroidered Dhwaya aloft and then they dance to the music of Duff and Dholak.

Most exciting part of the work in Mysore however, was the hunt for collecting material on the Mysore School of *Bharatnatyam*. Shri M.S. Natarajan of the *Natyasaraswathi*, and Shri Kumar Venkanna, a dancer and critic came all the way from Bangalore to Mysore to help me meet various dancers. Shri B.V.K. Sastri, a musician and music critic, joined our team in Mysore. We went to almost every house of dancers and collected a plethoric pile of information regarding the Mysore School of *Bharatnatyam*. Prominent among those who gave us valuable information were Shri Gundappa of Bangalore, Asthan Vidushi, Smt. Venkata Laksmamma, Asthan Vidushi Smt. Sundaramma, Asthan Vidwan, Shri Devendrappa, Smt. Putta Devamma, Smt. Chikkadevamma, Shri S. N. Swami and



Veena Sheshanna

Shri Appaswamy, son of Smt. Jetty Tayamma. Whatever coherent picture could be formed out of the material collected has been given elsewhere in this issue.

But I would like to mention a few words about the shooting and recordings of this style.

Smt. Venkatalashmamma and Smt. Sundaramma, both palace dancers, were kind enough to allow me to record and film their items. Both of them are disciples of Smt. Jetty Tayamma and are striving hard to continue the tradition established by their *guru*.

Smt. Venkatalakshamma, the senior of the two, gave us a lot of valuable information and arranged a performance in her house for me to record. While she recited the *Bols* and sang songs her talented and graceful granddaughter Shakuntala danced. After that Venkatalakshamma performed *Abhinayam* on a *sloka* from Krishna Karnamritam. I was thus able to make a recording of a complete performance of the Mysore School of *Bharatnatyam*.

Smt. Sundaramma gave me a similar recording of her programme and *Abhinayam* while her daughter Sushila danced. Apart from quite a lot of information about her *guru*, Smt. Sundaramma gave me a few valuable photographs of dancers of this School.

Our visit to Jetty Tayamma's house will always remain fresh in my memory. Her son Shri Appaswamy was so overcome with emotion that he talked incoherently. He took us



*Asthan Vidushi Smt. Venkatlakshamma*



*Asthan Vidushi Smt. Sundaramma*

round the room and showed us where the Natya Saraswathi used to sit for her study, meditation and performance etc. I was interested to see the collection of books that the late dancer had with her. Shri S.N. Swamy, her only male disciple who was there informed me that her collection of Sanskrit, Telugu and Kannada books had been bequeathed to him. He also informed me that her collection included some Hindustani books. One of them was in his possession. We had been told earlier that Jetti Tayamma performed *Abhinayam* on *Thumris* and was invited frequently by Muslims patrons of art during their functions. Therefore, this piece of information made me quite impatient to see the book and when I secured it in the evening I was surprised to see "Ghuncha-e-Raag" a book written by Mohamad Mardan Ali Khan and published at Nawal Kishore Press Lucknow in 1863. The book dealt with music and

dance and gave fourteen illustrations of *gats* of the *Kathak* dance. A Persian couplet was inscribed on the opening page while on the inside of the back cover was written in a scrawling hand the alphabets of Urdu. Obviously, Jetti Tayamma had written it for the purpose of learning and to serve as a ready reference. Whoever had inscribed that Persian couplet and given the book to her I found myself repeating his words in admiration of this grand lady:

*Whether in a tranquil state of satisfaction  
Or of painful consciousness  
Or of the craving frenzy of yearning  
My heart will go out to you  
In Love and admiration  
Like moth to the candle*