Rukmini Arundale, "High Priestess Of Dance," Passes Away at 82, Following Golden Jubilee Of her Kalakshetra School of Bharata Natyam
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"I don't think I have completely succeeded," Rukmini Devi Arundale, founder of the Kalakshetra dance school in Madras, ill and out of breath, told dance critic Sunil Kothari and India Today correspondent S.H. Venkataramani in early January. "The trends in our country have been going in the opposite direction. We still have to educate people in the fundamentals...Keeping in mind the prospects of money always, artists don't want to give themselves heart and soul to their art. If total dedication is there we can cultivate it."

Some six weeks later, on February 24, the elderly Brahmin lady died peacefully in a private hospital. She had devoted most of her 82 years to studying, performing and teaching bharata natyam dance, and had become a virtual symbol of her art. In latter years she became known as a purist and an authoritarian. In contrast, the major features of her life were built on an earlier disregard for social taboos.

It was her marriage in 1920 to George Sydney Arundale, a theosophist who came to Madras as principal of the Theosophical School, that first set folks to talking in the conservative Tamil community. This break with tradition paled, however, before the scandal caused by her enthrallment with the dance arts of the devadasis, derogatively known as "temple harlots." She is best known for taking that dance form, the Bharata Natyam, and making it respectable.

It all began, recounts 78-year old vice-president of Kalakshetra, one evening in 1929 when the Arundales went to see a dance program of the Tiruvalluputhur sisters, Jeevaratnam and Rajalakshmi. Rukmini, who three years earlier took ballet lessons from Anna Pavlova in Australia, was captivated. She became determined not only to learn the dance form from the finest dancers, but to free it from its

all-erotic connotations and its narrow social confines.

After studying for some 7 years, she opened Kalakshetra, or "temple of the arts," on January 6, 1936, in a simple thatch-roofed building in Madras. "Slowly, a system which was considered disrespectful and only fit for the devadasis was restored to devotion and dignity," writes S.H. Venkataramani in India Today. Explained S. Rajagopal, now principal of the College of Fine Arts in Kalakshetra: "Rukmini Devi Arundale has succeeded in eschewing all the lower types of shringara rasa (the erotic mood) and made dance dignified." In years since, bharata natyam has become a respected religious art form practiced by thousands of Hindu women and men not only in India but worldwide. Over 600 students have graduated from Kalakshetra, many of them to become great and famous dancers.

Rukmani's strategy was reinforced by composing her own dance dramas based on various Hindu scriptures and epics. A strict code of purity is enforced at the school, and a 15-minute prayer held before any dance can begin.

One of the controversies before her death surrounded the future of the school after her passing. Who could fill the shoes of one who had so dominated the institution for 50 years? "There may be somebody who has the flame to carry on from me. Somehow it may hit a spark," she offered feebily. Already, though, as if aware of her immanent transition, she had pushed through a new scheme of management by a management trust.

Kalakshetra

Not all the 225 students presently enrolled at Kalakshetra study dancing. Carnatic music, painting and other fine arts are taught as well. A majority of students reside on the guru-kulam like campus. Students, Indian and foreign, are taught to "lead simple lives and to learn to understand the full and true meaning of art in its twin aspects of inspiration and expression." Kalakshetra promotes "the religious spirit on a non-sectarian basis." Youths are taught to become self-reliant and helpful and understanding toward others.

"I think of art as a complete whole, of the way we live, everything we do, everything we say...

That is why I feel it is necessary to educate young people not only to train them as great artists, but also as cultured people, to appreciate art, to be sensitive to beauty, and ultimately to be sensitive to all humanity. If we are sensitive to beauty, we also become sensitive to all humanity."