



Kalakshetra's Influence on Evolution of Bharatanatyam Pedagogy



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Abstract

Bharatanatyam, one of the ancient Indian classical dances, has undergone a long journey to establish itself as an institution, from the Devadasi tradition, which was suppressed under the British prohibition, to its preservation by the pioneers of Bharatanatyam dance, and finally established as an institution by the great legend Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale and E. Krishna Iyer, it's been an incredible journey. This research paper examines the changes that occurred in Bharatanatyam pedagogy after the tradition was institutionalised through the case study of the Kalakshetra Foundation. The Kalakshetra institution was established by Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale in the year 1936 in Adyar, Chennai. She developed a pedagogy for learning Bharatanatyam in a structured manner while maintaining the authenticity of the art form, incorporating both the traditional Guru-Shishya Parampara and modern aesthetic implications. Here, the research methodology will be qualitative, which includes interviews with Kalakshetra alumni, a questionnaire, a case study method, and archival interviews and speeches of Smt. Rukmini Devi Arundale. This paper highlights the influence of the Kalakshetra Foundation on the teaching traditions.

Keywords: Kalakshetra, Bharatanatyam, Pedagogy, Institution, Rukmini Devi Arundale.

Research Paper

Introduction

Bharatanatyam, the Indian classical dance, originates in the southern part of India, specifically in Tanjore, Tamil Nadu. The old names of Bharatanatyam are Dasiattam, Sadir, and Chinna melam. The devadasis used to perform this dance form at the temples of Tamil Nadu. The devadasis had a significant role in society. "The most important validation ceremony for the devadasi who danced as part of the temple ritual was to be formally married and dedicated to the temple deity or to a ritual object (kalyanam)."¹ Everything was very peaceful until the abolition of the devadasi system by the British in 1922. The downfall of the devadasi system made the condition of the devadasi pathetic, and they also suffered from the financial crisis. "After the passing of the Devadasi Bill, in 1947, dancing in the temples of Tamil Nadu was no longer permitted as a part of temple ritual. Its ultimate demise has been attributed to public pressure, largely instigated by Dr S.

Muthulakshmi Reddy."² Then, to protect the art form from abolition, Rukmini Devi Arundale and the lawyer and freedom fighter E. Krishna Iyer came forward to preserve the dignity of Bharatanatyam. "Muthulakshmi Reddy's call for a 'revival' was followed by the non-hereditary dancer/teacher Rukmini Devi founding a dance school, Kalakshetra (1936), where she 'improved' the dance (Sarada 1985)."³ However, in the 20th century, this art form, Sadir or Bharatanatyam, underwent a commendable transformation from Guru-Shishya Parampara to an institution. Rukmini Devi Arundale dedicated her entire life to the development of Kalakshetra and produced numerous talented dancers for the world. "Rukmini Devi has regenerated this art and rescued it from degradation and virtual extinction and restored it to its pristine beauty by permeating it with a religious and devotional spirit and has rescued it from all monopolies, especially as regards teaching and conducting."⁴ Certain aspects that make Kalakshetra

unique among other institutions are its discipline, hard work, creativity, devotion to the art, and the endless hours of practice. At the beginning, Rukmini Devi “started an International Academy of Arts with the sole purpose of resuscitating in modern India the recognition of the priceless artistic traditions in our country and later on, the International Arts Academy, shifted to Tiruvanmiyur (a suburb of Madras) and renamed as Kalakshetra, employed the services of traditional gurus like Muthukumar Pillai, Dandayudapani, Ambu Panikar, Chandu Panikkar, Karaikkal Saradambal and Gowri Ammal.”⁵

This research focuses on how the Kalakshetra institution made a structured pedagogy of Bharatanatyam with slight changes from the traditional one. It includes the syllabus, methods of teaching, and what they are adding the unique techniques to produce extraordinary Bharatanatyam dancers.

Objective

- To highlight the structured pedagogy followed by Kalakshetra.
- To find out the challenges faced during the transformation from Guru-shishya Parampara to an Institution.
- To explore how Kalakshetra’s pedagogy influenced other dance institutions.
- To examine the drawbacks of training in the institution.

Research questions

- Which structure of pedagogy is being followed by Kalakshetra?
- What was the reason behind the transformation of the Guru-Shishya Parampara to an institution?
- Which dance manuals did they use as a base to establish a standard pedagogy?

Methodology: This research paper employs a case study method through qualitative research analysis, with data collected primarily from interviews and a questionnaire, as well as secondary sources, including archival interviews, speeches by Rukmini Devi Arundale, books, articles, and research papers.

Discussion

Kalakshetra was a visionary gem of Rukmini Devi Arundale. The foundation seed of Kalakshetra was established by the Theosophical Society at the end of the nineteenth century, of which Rukmini Devi was a member. Initially, it was named the International

Academy of Dance, but later it was renamed Kalakshetra. Annie Besant also played a crucial role in Rukmini Devi’s life in the establishment of her dream project, as she was also a member of the Theosophical Society. Everything was going very well; together they accomplished many goals, but a hard time came in Rukmini Devi’s life. When she lost her role model and inspiration, Annie Besant. “She died in 1993, and with George Arundale, who was President of the Theosophical Society, withered away, till all connection snapped. The institution had to be shifted to new premises and thanks to the efforts of trusted well-wishers like P. Doraiswamy Iyer (whose sister Padmasini, a doctor became one of the founder members serving Kalakshetra till her death) who purchased the first piece of land from a fisherman two miles down the Adayar coast, bit by bit, over years the present complex at Tiruvanmiyur came up.”⁶ There were many hands behind the successful establishment of this premise. The aura of Kalakshetra is heavenly, with greenery all around the institution. In the beginning, the classes used to be taken under the shade of the banyan trees, which truly gives the essence of Guru-Shishya Parampara. Slowly, it got transformed into several cottages where the classes used to be taken by different teachers. Rukmini Devi tried her best to give a homely vibe to the students who came to learn dance by leaving their homes from all over the world. “In 1944, Rukmini Devi affiliated Kalakshetra Music courses with the Madras University (Menon: 12). Ten years later, Kalakshetra offered short courses in music and Natya and part-time courses in Music, Bharatanatyam, and painting. By the 1950s, students from all over India, Tibet, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia came to study in Devi’s centre.”⁷ Once Rukmini Devi said in her interview at the Field Club, Bombay, that “I very especially emphasise this Indian spirit in which the daily life and mind of the dancer or artist is consecrated to the highest, in which the artist will of no reward, or public opinion. Public opinion changes from time to time, while true art never changes. I am more interested in making artists than in creating technicians, though it can never be possible to produce many great geniuses.”⁸ N.S. Jayalakshmi, one of the students of the Theosophical Society and Kalakshetra, and eventually the professor of Kalakshetra, claimed that “ Kalakshetra was the first institution of dance education in India to have an organised curriculum with a balance of both performance and theory components needed to educate a knowledgeable artist.”⁹ At Kalakshetra, students also have the opportunity to learn



allied subjects, including Carnatic music, Sanskrit, and Kathakali, which are taught by the best faculty. Rukmini Devi blended her training in Ballet from Anna Pavlova and the traditional training of Bharatanatyam together to give a modern standardised form, which made the visuals of performance sharper, refined and full of aesthetics. “She defined Bharatanatyam neither as a style nor as a tradition, but as a trait, a common quality, which in turn contributed to and undergirded all classical Indian dance.”¹⁰ Rukmini Devi implemented a pedagogy to be followed by the institution. “In institutionalising Bharatanatyam training, Devi combined a modern concern with standardised, uniform teaching methods with the incorporation into dance instruction of traditional high-caste practices such as vegetarianism, early morning prayer, and the recitation of Sanskrit verses, linking dance training to the theosophist goal of creating a rational, contemporaneous version of Sanskrit culture.”¹¹ The dance manual, which is being used in their daily practice sessions, is the *Abhinaya Darpana*. Rukmini Devi had used the roots of the Pandanallur style's vocabulary and repertoire in her transformation journey. Her reconstruction maintained the Sanskrit legacy along with the essence of *sadirattam*, which made people accept this evolution with open hands. And when it comes to the *abhinaya* items of the repertoire, she was against the erotic and sensual expressions; rather, she was in favour of the *Bhakti Shringar*, and she implemented it in her pedagogy. “Eventually her repertoire was stripped of those pieces involving explicit eroticism and others were carefully edited: Rukmini Devi’s dance repertoire was unique and varied...she expressed the *Sringara-Rasa*- the emotion of love fully, but in its most refined form, without any trace of vulgarity” (S.Sarada 1985:45).¹² Now in today’s generation we can witness that Kalakshetra has become the most popular style which is being followed by most of the Bharatanatyam dancers.

Core Technical and Aesthetics Features of Kalakshetra Bani

A. Adavu System: Kalakshetra is also known for its distinctive codified *adavu* system. Rukmini Devi had worked intensively on the techniques of the *adavus*, and she made a proper standardised *adavu* system. Initially, in the other *Banis* of Bharatanatyam, *adavus* were not arranged in the proper sequence, and also the number of *adavus* was not organized. There was also confusion about the names of *adavus*, as they were based on

the native languages of the respective *Bani*, for example, *Parval Adavu*, which was also used to refer to *Pakka Adavu* or *Periya Adavu*. But then Rukmini Devi clarified this confusion and named the *adavus* according to their *bols*, like *Tat Tai Ta Ha adavu*, and set the number of *adavus* to be done in each different *adavu* like in *Tatta adavu*, eight variations, and so on. And her emphasis on the techniques was commendable, the clarity of lines, geometric position, *aramandi* with proper knees out, and torso alignment. These are the elements that make the *adavus* of Kalakshetra *Bani* more beautiful.



Figure 1 <https://satvikamshivam.weebly.com/adavu-system.html>



Figure 2 <https://kalakshetra.in/college/courses/bharatnatyam/>

B. Drama Production: In the history of Bharatanatyam, Rukmini Devi played a vital role in developing this solo art form into a full-fledged dance drama group production. In Kalakshetra, she introduced a new choreographic presentation methodology where she combined the elements of Bharatanatyam with the techniques of Kathakali and used them in her dance drama choreography. She also worked on the theatrical aspects, like stage setting, visual symmetry, and story narratives. She choreographed several dance dramas

like the Ramayana series, which became one of the most significant contributions to Indian dance theatre. The systematic training, discipline, and dedication make her production worldwide famous.

C. Dance Costumes: Rukmini Devi made a crucial change in the Aharya Abhinaya, in which costume plays a significant role. Earlier, Devadasis used to wear normal sarees for the performance, then stiched costume discovered, but Rukimini Devi made a huge change in the styling of the costumes. “Rukimini Devi studied the scriptures for references to the attire of the dancer. She also studied the bar-reliefs in the temple walls to see how the dancers were draped.”¹³ Then she invented the pyjama-style costume, which was very comfortable and aesthetically beautiful.

Devadasi’s Costume



Figure 1 <https://kalyanikalamandir.com/dasiattam/>

Rukmini Devi’s Costume



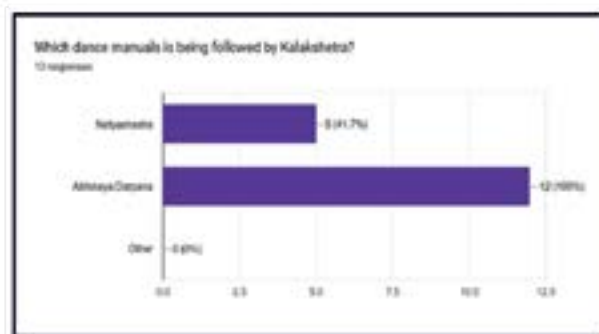
Figure 2 <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/from-the-archives-rukmini-arundale-rhythm-dvine-1918028-2022-02-25>

Findings

In this study, data were gathered through a Google Form survey, which I distributed to current students, alumni, and faculty members of Kalakshetra. Out of which I received responses from 12 persons, including 6 alumni and 6 current students. Regarding the duration of respondents, 5 of them had been associated with the institution for less than 5 years, 4 of them had been associated with the institution for around 3-5 years, and 3 of them had been associated with the institution for more than 5 years.

Now, I will analyse the data one by one accordingly:

- The first question was about the dance manual which is being followed by Kalakshetra, as Fig. 1 shows the data that 41.7% (n=5) of respondents selected both Natyashastra and Abhinaya Darpana, and 100% (n=12) had selected only Abhinaya Darpana. This means that the syllabus mainly follows the Abhinaya Darpana.



- The second question was, does Kalakshetra focus more on experimentation than tradition in the pedagogy?

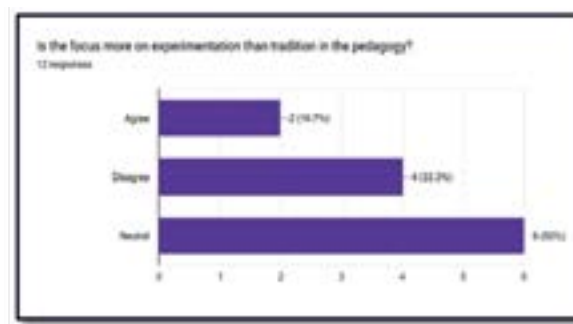


Fig. 2 shows that out of 12 respondents, 50% (n=6) chose neutral, meanwhile 16.7% (n=2) agreed with the statement, and another 33.3% (n=4) disagreed. This indicates that there is a different perspective according to the people, as it is showing undetermined mixed responses.



- The third question was, Does the syllabus at Kalakshetra incorporate theoretical knowledge alongside practical training?

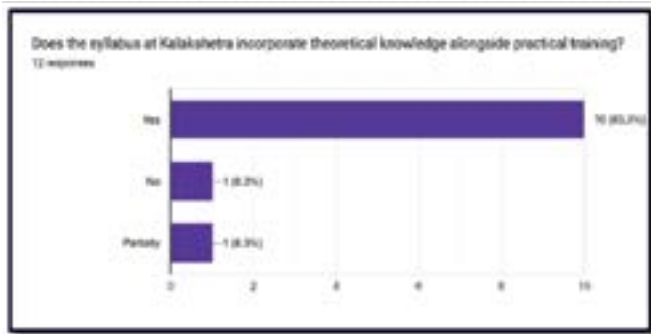


Fig. 3 shows that 83.3% (n=10) chose yes, and only 8.3% (n=1) chose no, and 8.3% (n=1) chose partially, which clarifies that the Kalakshetra syllabus strongly focuses on the theoretical knowledge along with practical training.

- The fourth question was, Does training include strict discipline?

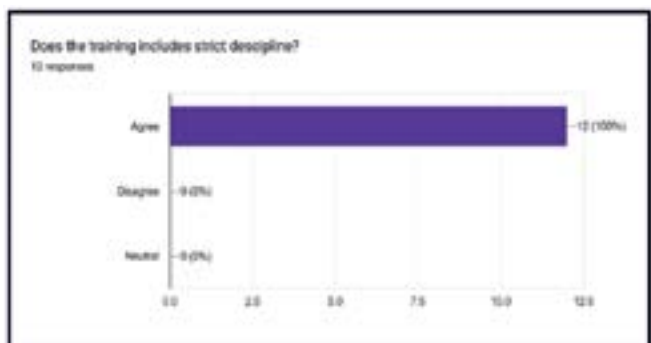


Fig. 4 clearly shows that 100% (n=12) chose yes, which suggests that Kalakshetra never compromise with the discipline. Discipline is one of the key factors that make Kalakshetra special.

- The last question was, Does Kalakshetra maintain a balance between guru-shishya tradition and institutional norms?



Fig. 5 signifies that 91.7% (n=11) majority agreed with the statement, which indicates that there is a strong belief that the institution maintains a balance between traditional and new teaching methods. One respondent, 8.3% (n=1), disagreed with the statement, whereas 8.3% (n=1) remained neutral.

These responses reflect the personal perspective of every individual who participated in this survey, and the responses helped to understand Kalakshetra's influence on the evolution of Bharatanatyam pedagogy.

There are many dance institutions in India and other countries that are following the norms of Kalakshetra in their institutes to maintain the standard and dignity of Bharatanatyam. They have adopted a codified set of adavus, warm-up exercises, technical nuances, and teaching allied subjects like Carnatic vocal, folk arts, literature, crafts, and fine arts. This shows the tremendous impact of the transformation from Guru Shishya Parampara to the institution. Earlier, during the oral tradition, students completed their training while staying with their gurus in their homes, and they mostly learn by observation. There was no standard curriculum to be followed by the gurus; they did not teach any other skills like playing tattakazhi, nattuvangam, or making of notations. The students used to learn extra skills through their own efforts and observations. After the establishment of Kalakshetra as an institution, huge changes occurred in the pedagogy. A codified set of syllabi makes it more convenient to learn dance along with all the other skills in the five years, which used to take more than twenty years. Over the years, Kalakshetra has produced brilliant and extraordinary students, who are serving their lives for the upliftment of Bharatanatyam. Many alumni of Kalakshetra have opened their own private institutions in India and in foreign countries, in which they are carrying out the legacy of Rukmini Devi Arundale, some of the examples are V.P. and Shanta Dhananjayan's "Bharata Kalanjali", Leela Samson's "Spanda Dance Company", C.V. Chandrashekar's "Nrithyasree" and many more. The pedagogy of Kalakshetra is not being followed by the private institutions, but also by the Government Universities like Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi, Indira Kala Sangeet Vishwavidyalaya, Khairagarh and Madras University, Chennai, The Maharaja Sayaji Rao University of Baroda, Raja Man Singh Tomar Music and Arts University, Gwalior, etc. Thus, the standards of Kalakshetra have really set a model for all the dance institutions all over the world, and it also inspires them to explore, innovate and create.

Conclusion

Kalakshetra's role in the evolution of Bharatanatyam pedagogy has played a significant role in transforming the oral tradition of the guru-shishya Parampara to a structured institutional form. The well-defined curriculum, syllabus, and training helped shape the life of a Bharatanatyam dancer. The promotion of dance manuals, such as Abhinaya Darpana, is also reflected in their curriculum. The adoption of new techniques has seen, but they haven't overshadowed the traditional roots. Due to its extra emphasis on technical accuracy, practice sessions, discipline, and aesthetic purity, it not only reinforces the fundamentals of pedagogy but also helps to influence Bharatanatyam dancers globally. Kalakshetra's standard pedagogy has also set a benchmark for many other dance institutions of India. Many alumni of Kalakshetra are serving in reputed universities in India and abroad, and they are promoting the values of Kalakshetra. Thus, Kalakshetra and all the other institutions influenced by Kalakshetra's pedagogy stand both as preservers and promoters of Bharatanatyam's aesthetics while maintaining its traditional roots.

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