

A perfectionist

Sarada was a Bharatanatyam student at Kalakshetra who made a mark in the world of dance after G. Lilavati and Radha Sriram – the first and second pupils of the institution. She identified herself with all the noble work Rukmini Devi (Athai) initiated and sustained—from her student days till she retired from Kalakshetra in 1996. Sarada and Anandi (Kalki's daughter) turned up one day while Athai and I were conducting a rehearsal. Athai asked them if they could dance what they had seen. They performed enthusiastically. Sarada danced the javali *Sarigakongu* and Anandi performed *En palli kondeerayya*. Sarada, remembering Athai's dance, imitated her movements and did the sanchari of Krishna stealing butter. Athai immediately gave the green signal and the two girls were overjoyed.

As sakhi in *Kumara Sambhavam*



Sarada joined the Besant Memorial School founded by Dr. G.S. Arundale in 1934. She had completed Form 3 when she became a dance pupil on 27th June 1939. Athai herself performed the pooja when the dance class commenced. Sarada had, even as a child, taken part in a few plays produced by Athai – such as *Light of Asia*, *Bheeshma*, and *Karaikkal Ammaiyyar*. She was the lotus in the children's play *The Lotus and the Bee* produced by Mary Elmore and Rukmini Devi who was a nature lover.

Little Sarada grew up in the Theosophical Society in Adyar where children were special residents under the magnetic influence of Dr. George Arundale. When her parents shifted to Madurai, Athai took Sarada under her care and she continued to live in the Kalakshetra hostel. She was a resident of the hostel as a student and also later as a teacher till she married Peter Hoffman in 1960. He had come to India with Athai to work for her. Sarada has two children – Krishna and Geeta – and Athai doted on them.

Sarada came to be known as “Chinna Sarada” and I as “Peria Sarada” because of the difference in our age. I was a pupil teacher in Kalakshetra when she joined as a 10-year old student. The prefix of Peria and Chinna have stuck to our names till now!

Sarada danced as the sakhi in *Kutrala Kuravanji* along with Rukmini Devi who was the heroine Vasantavalli. Later when Sarada portrayed the heroine, Athai designed a beautiful south Indian costume for her. Sarada brought glory to all the characters she performed, whether it was a major role or a minor one. She never hesitated to dance along with students she had trained. She was a sakhi to Shanta's (Dhananjayan) Radha in *Geeta Govindam*. Even when she appeared as one of the apsara-s in *Paduka Pattabhishekam* (Ramayana series), for only a few minutes, she brightened the stage with her dance. Her portrayal of Manthara in *Sreerama Vanagamanam* is memorable. She danced in the lead role in *Andal Charitam*, portraying the young Andal's longing for Sreekrishna with full involvement.

Sarada was of great help to Athai in all her cultural activities. She was also incharge of the costumes in the

SPECIAL FEATURE

concert department for many years. She has trained numerous dancers at Kalakshetra. She is a perfectionist in every way – as a dancer and teacher. She would be very strict and insist on perfection in class and during rehearsals. Many of her students are well known dancers and teachers carrying on the good work in India and other parts of the world. Sarada has naturally been identified with Kalakshetra with which she was closely associated from 1939 till her retirement in 1996. She is the recipient of awards like the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award, Kalaimamani from the Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram, and Natyarangam's award for a senior Bharatanatyam guru. The latest feather in her cap, and a most deserving one is the Sangeeta Kala Acharya award from the Music Academy, as she has spent the best part of her life teaching and shaping students in Kalakshetra.

PERIA SARADA
As told to G. SUNDARI

Photos in this section
COURTESY C. NACHIAPPAN /
KALAKSHETRA PUBLICATIONS



As Manthara (R) with Kaikeyi