

Leela Samson Bridging two worlds

As the Director of the Kalakshetra Foundation what are your priorities?

Kalakshetra Foundation comprises the Kalakshetra College of Fine Arts, The Besant Theosophical High School, The Besant Arundale Senior Secondary School, a Craft Education and Research Centre including the Weaving Department, the Kalamkari Natural-Dye Printing & Painting unit, the Visual Arts Centre, The Bharata Kalakshetra Auditorium, the Rukmini Arangam, four libraries, the Rukmini Devi Museum, hostels, staff quarters and guest houses.

I took charge on 6th May 2005. My first priority was to unify the divided administrative system. The Director has to administer all the centres though the hub of the activity is the College of Fine Arts. The administrative wing and the fine arts college were distanced from each other. I wanted to bring them closer (literally and figuratively), so I planned a central office. I chose a central area which was actually a dump house, invited a young architect to work on it. I told him I wanted an ambience which says: "Come in, enjoy our office."

[The office is spacious and comfortably furnished, with sunlight streaming in through the long vertical windows.]

The second priority was to improve connectivity through technology within the campus as well as with the outside world. We have introduced computers and set up a network. There is now a central accounting system. Computerisation requires upgrading at every step. All this is expensive but it has increased connectivity, improved efficiency, made the youngsters feel more responsible and confident.

The next priority was to improve the hostel and the kitchen as both are very important for the well being of the child. There was lack of discipline, no prayer before eating, no dhyanam, no punctuality. The students were not getting up early and making use of the beautiful morning hours for yoga or for practice. I wanted to change this attitude. The students were caught in a groove. I had to persuade and coerce them

S. Janaki



"to wake them out of their slumber".

Initially I did face some resistance, but the youngsters soon realised that it was for their own good. I had given myself a year to get all this done, but it has taken some more time to set up a system and get it going.

What are the steps taken to improve documentation and dissemination?

We have improved our website and are letting the world know what we have to offer in the performing arts, archives, documentation as well as in our textile and kalamkari units. "Why should Rukmini Devi's work not be available to others?" We have started cleaning and digitizing the old tapes which were lying locked up in awful cupboards. I want the world to know and appreciate her work.

The Rukmini Devi museum should be an interactive one where visitors can hear her views, listen to music, watch video clippings. There is so much to share — Athai's contribution in various spheres, that of the great masters who taught in Kalakshetra, our dance repertoire, the dance-dramas.... After all how much can one imitate or rob!

As an institution, don't we have a responsibility to document, record and pass it on to our future generations? In fact Athai had acquired some of the latest equipment but did not have a technical person to man them.

I want to record whatever people who have worked with Athai or have learnt from her have to share — people like Peria Sarada, Sarada Hoffman, C.V. Chandrasekhar, D. Pasupathy, Adyar Lakshmanan, Seetarama Sarma, and so many others. At the same time, there should also be a critiquing of the work, a healthy discussion, an analysis and assessment by knowledgeable persons from outside, like Kapila Vatsyayan.

There may come a time when there will be a dryness of thought, of crass commercialism in the world. It is then that such quality work may ignite a spark of creativity or touch a chord in artists and people.