

Blessings from angels

V.A.K. Ranga Rao

I honestly cannot recall when and how I met Anandhi Ramachandran. I was a regular at Kalakshetra programmes and on happy terms with singer-nattuvanars Kamalarani, Bhagavatula Seetharama Sarma and the man I described as second to Nandi as far as dance was concerned, Karaikudi R. Krishnamurthy. You should have heard, and seen him play for Krishnaveni and Srividya (MLV's daughter who learnt Bharatanatyam from K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai). His 'dance' and their 'percussion' was a heady combination. No, Nandi would not have been jealous but definitely he would have been interested.

I think Anandhi was on the staff of Kalakshetra and as far as I was concerned, she was a spokesperson trying to generate goodwill in me for Kalakshetra. No, I was not against the institution, knowing about the Everest that was carefully groomed by the arts-affinity of Rukmini Devi Arundale and managerial acumen of Sankara Menon.

I was reviewing dance for the *Indian Express* and it was clear through them that I was not awed by the Kalakshetra aura into turning out namby-pamby write-ups about its productions. Long before this I had been impressed by *Usha Parinayam* and *Rukmangada Charitram* staged at the Museum Theatre. I expected this heavenly fusion of music and movement in every production of theirs. I found it in *Rukmini Kalyanam* (these three were adapted from the Melattur Bhagavata Mela tradition, in the presence of Balu Bhagavata nodding to Rukmini Devi's fancies). It was totally absent from *Krishnamari Kuravanji*, a later production. In *Sakuntalam*, the pure



Anandhi

dance by Krishnaveni as Nati was heavenly and the rest of it quite the opposite, two girls from the north-east as Anasuya and Priyamvada taking the cake for abominable pronunciation of Kalidasa's Sanskrit.

In one of Kalakshetra's rare presentations of a regular Bharatanatyam programme, I was depressed and incensed by the ridiculously sanitised presentation of the Telugu piece, *Oorake rammante vachuna pakkaku, Oorivari paduchu*. In simple Telugu it says "Will a woman of the town bed you without payment?" It was dry-cleaned into "Will a woman of the town come to your side without payment?" making nonsense of the meaning of the charanam. Anandhi Ramachandran said in general that anything fashioned in Rukmini Devi's reign would not be changed in Kalakshetra. Bhagavatula Seetharama Sarma who knew Telugu like an academic, confirmed it.

Yes, I did know that Anandhi was Kalki's daughter and that she was dancing along with MS's daughter Radha, when they were young girls,

performing to guru Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai's cymbals. It was she who told me that Bharatiar's *Adivome* was tuned by S.V. Venkatraman (MS' staff music-director) for their dance. As I saw and heard it for the first time in AVM's *We Two*, I presumed it was tuned by the studio's staff music-director R. Sudarsanam.

Then and now, I think I know a lot about the movies of the period 1935-1965. Anandhi corrected me about the songs in *Meera*; not all those released on 78 rpm records under that film's imprimatur were in the film. And about the fresh music that was composed for the Hindi version. In the Tamil version Nagiah has a solo decorating himself. In Hindi, he sings a Meera bhajan along with MS, *Ghanshyam ayare*. This was released on a 12" disc. GNB had two beautiful solo numbers in *Sakunthalai*, but thanks to the nepotism of the producer (MS's husband), none of these solo numbers were issued on disc. Anandhi knew this but did not seem to be aware of the intent behind these machinations. She must have been a little girl at that time.

She had a lot to say about learning dance and how it was master-minded by Sadasivam, with an occasional word put in by Kalki about the choice of songs. I remember and cherish her warmth, in spite of my trying to cleverly rile her steadfast loyalty to Kalakshetra. She must have seen something worth encouraging inside that difficult-to-like exterior.

Does anybody remember V. Sarala Rao aka Vakkalanka Sarala? As a playback singer she had two of the most popular all-time hits in Telugu, *Kadusuma kala kadusuma*—a duet with Ghantasala from *Keelugurram*

and *Teeyani vennela reyi*—a solo from *Balaraju* for Anjali Devi's dance that permeated the conscience of film-going youth of Andhra.

A great singer? I was too young to judge then, being less than ten years old, but hers was a unique voice that did ample justice to all kinds of songs including a Meghasandesam kind of lament, *Parugette mabullara* from *Navvite Navaratnalu*. Marriage to Dr. V. Kameswara Rao and three children—Swapnasundari who helped revive the dance of coastal Andhra sanivaru, named Vilasini by Dr. Arudra; Padma an expert in German and Dr. Vakkalanka Venkataramana, a doctorate in inter-disciplinary anatomy. Incidentally all three acted in one film each, *Mahakavi Kshetraya*, *Gorintaku* and as a child artist in *Chitti Tammudu* (the Telugu incarnation of *Oliver Twist*) respectively.

After a stint as a music composer in the Government's Song & Drama Division in Delhi, Sarala settled in Madras, in Tanjore Street, a ten-minute walk from my haunt of those days, Sri Krishna Gana Sabha in T' Nagar. I would visit them often as they made it clear that I was welcome. An additional magnet was the effusive affection of their dachshundy-dog Santri. Before going in, I would sit on the front-steps with him for a while before I had Sarala shout from inside: "Are you going to come in or keep dallying with the dog!"

Knowing that I was exposed to music of various kinds in different languages of many countries through the thousands of 78s I had, she would ask for my opinion on a new composition of hers. No, she wasn't deluded about my musical knowledge. She gave me the impression that she was interested in the opinion of a person whose taste was not coloured by any one kind of music. I remember one occasion clearly. She sang a few songs of Annamacharya she was to record for the Master Recording Company's Sangeetha cassettes a



Sarala

few days hence. I liked some, loved two but objected to one saying it had an overly familiar tune. She tried to explain by saying that in that particular raga, one tune could not be much different from another. My face said "Nothing doing!" Within half an hour she came up with something fresh as an early morning, dew-kissed champaka. She fixed it on seeing my lit up face. This cassette had the voices of Mangalampalli Balamuralikrishna, Swapnasundari and hers. Swapnasundari's *Ponnalalo vege poddu* is a celestial Sirius, soft, bright, scintillating.

While we were bickering about this tune and that, sometimes raising our voice, the Doctor would poke in "Stop screaming. The neighbours might call the police!" These occasional admonitions gave us the break we needed to fortify our own beliefs with reasoned logic.

Noticing my abiding interest in Annamacharya's songs, one day she sat me down and gave me advice that has bettered my life "You are taken up by Annamacharya. Fine. But how can you study the 12,000 sankeertanams now available? Concentrate on one kind. On his Dasavatara compositions. Here. I have copied down a few.

Collect the rest and get going!" Saying that she gave me a sheaf of handwritten papers. That gave me a more accessible hill to climb. Today my concentration made that an ivory pedestal to sit on. Yes, a pedestal. Yes, of ivory.

I have collected around a hundred of these, which mentioned all the ten incarnations, by the father, son and grandson. Only three are in Sanskrit. I pored over S.K. Ramachandra Rao's six volumes of *Pratima Kosha*, fought with him about the sloka on Buddha being at variance with the Buddhist Buddha illustration, harangued about the two forms of Kalki I noticed in south Indian temples. In Maddur, a Rama Temple more famous for a small shrine to crawling Krishna (between Bengaluru and Mysore), Kalki is seen in a mandapa outside with a human body and horse's head, not as a rider on a horse. His patience with an upstart like me was motherly.

All because of her direction, I delved deeper. How to separate Balarama and Krishna by the colour of their dress! Blue and black. Annamayya says Balarama wore a blue veshti (*neeli kaase gochi*), brought to him by river Yamuna trying to appease him (*Bhrigu Purana*). I demolished the false claims of so-called savants who confused Buddha avatara with Krishna (*Purasatula manamulu pollujesina cheyi*). Pored over two works in Sanskrit, the Kashmiri Kshemendra's *Dasavatara Charitram* (prose), put Jayadeva's *Pralaya payodhi jaley* from *Geeta Govindam* (poetry) under an electron microscope. And ended up with untold wealth rivalling that at Alakapuri. Smug? No. Searching!

My forehead on the feet of that lady, my signpost to achievement.

(The author is a renowned dance critic, film historian and collector of gramophone records)