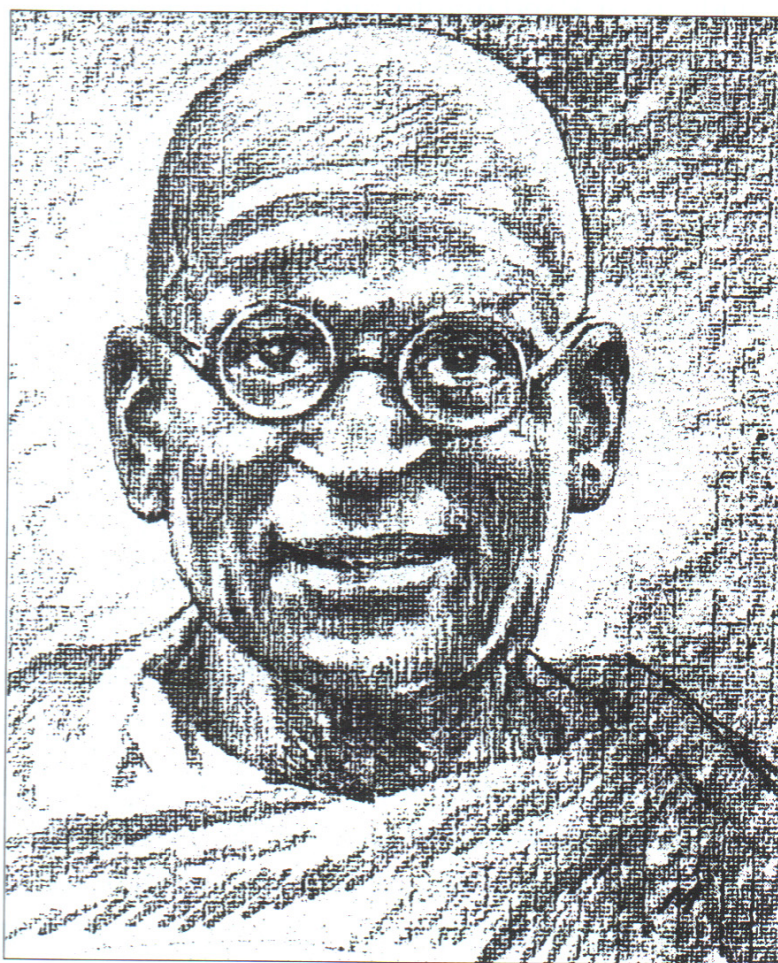


# Some distinguished disciples of Guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai

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M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA

In order to appreciate the contribution made by an illustrious Guru like Meenakshisundaram Pillai, it is as imminent to learn about his own beliefs and ambitions, his own ways of life and attitudes as those of his disciples, especially when these disciples had taken forward his mission and his aspirations, simultaneously moulding their own future as that of Bharatanatyam. Meenakshisundaram Pillai stood at the crossroads of a past vestige and a present crisis and, in such a precarious predicament, he chose to travel with the young aspirants to create a future for them as well as for Bharatanatyam. The disciples



are numerous and of all hues and colours. While remembering the great savant, it

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will be worthwhile to remember some of his more distinguished disciples whose work widened the Bharatanatyam horizons and whose life-long work of meaningful and memorable creativity strengthened the art form and furthered its expansion.

There seem to be two distinct phases in the life of Meenakshisundaram Pillai: the pre-1935 years when he resided at his village teaching devadasi girls and nattuvanars of the community to whom he traditionally imparted training. He rarely stirred out of Pandanallur, nor was he interested in making a name for himself. Here was *the* profession he had chosen and he only knew that he should do it with whole-hearted sincerity. It was in this phase that he taught several devadasis of Pandanallur and the surrounding villages and whichever nattuvanar that approached him for training. The second phase is more vibrant and relevant for the future growth of the art form. Earlier it was a profession; in fact, a craft (like that of pottery or goldsmithy) which was hereditary and mandatory so that the girls so graduated would be ordained as temple dancers. As the temple priests were trained, so were the dancers. The students of the second phase are exactly the opposite of the first; for they came from cities, and due to artistic compulsions, - “in search of roots,” so to say. They are of different social and caste groups whose general educational background was higher than that of the traditional group of learners. They risked – all of them – and decided, out of their sheer love for the art – that they should pursue it. In their belief and hardwork, in their tenacity and purposefulness their destinies depended. They needed someone to show them the way, artistically. The devadasi group learnt Bharatanatyam from him, more for financial and familial and hereditary compulsions than for artistic reasons. (That some of them had attained artistic excellence was more a result of personal aspirations than of the art). The guru taught both the groups with the same seriousness and some of them, belonging to both the groups, attained fame. There is no reason to believe that he showed any discrimination between them either in his personal behaviour or professional approach. These distinguished dancers upheld his principles of artistic excellence and so need an honoured mention in the context of an appraisal of Meenakshisundaram Pillai as “a Teacher of Teachers.”

Among the devadasi dancers who studied Bharatanatyam with him in the first phase, the name of Tiruvallaputtur Kalyani Ammal, who was first trained by Pandanallur Kumaraswamy Pillai and later by Meenakshisundaram comes first. She was a rage in her days and a dancer of very high quality. She also learnt



Tiruvallaputtur  
Kalyani Ammal

abhinaya from time to time from Triplicane Neelammal. It was said that Meenakshisundaram Pillai's "celebrated singing was associated particularly with her performances, which he invariably attended as a nattuvanar."<sup>1</sup> Ram Gopal, "the Prince Charming" of Indian dance (as he was hailed) writes that "Kalyani Ammal had a great love affair with Meenakshisundaram, when both were young and Jeevaratnam, her daughter and a later-day celebrity, it was rumoured, was the 'flower' of their passion."<sup>2</sup> On the authority of Shanta Rao, a close disciple of Pillai in the post-1935 group, her biographer writes that "Meenakshisundaram's

attachment to Jeevaratnam's mother is said to have lasted throughout his life, and she was warmly accepted by his own family."<sup>3</sup> She was a specialist in performing *varnams* and *jatiswams* and was so thorough in her improvisational excellence that she accepted a challenge to perform the Chakravaka *Jatiswaram* composed by Raja Panditurai Thevar of Ramnad the next evening. All other narathaki-s withdrew for lack of sufficient time or ability, but Kalyani Ammal fulfilled the challenge and was hailed by all the connoisseurs and the elite in the court.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporaneous with her who studied dance under Pillai and shot into fame was Thangachi Amma of Pandanallur village. She first learnt dance from Nataraja Pillai and later from Meenakshisundaram Pillai. As reported by Dr. B.M. Sundaram, an authority on the dancers and nattuvanars of the Vellala community, "She (Thangachi Amma) never danced the same *varnam* in two consecutive performances, unless she had to oblige the audience,"<sup>5</sup> suggesting thereby that her repertoire was so large and varied. He further commented, quoting Meenakshisundaram Pillai himself "*Sudati ninne...*" was "Thangachi's own treasure."<sup>6</sup> She was the first to include 'kite dance' in her recitals. We are told that she was also the first to do abhinaya for *Krishna Karnamritha* slokas.

Sabharanjitham and her cousin Nagaratham were popular and had performed in the Music Academy and other sabhas in Madras and fared extremely well. Though B.M. Sundaram had suggested<sup>7</sup> that it was on seeing Sabharanjitham's performance that Rukmini Devi Arundale was inspired to learn from Meenakshisundaram Pillai, it was really Jeevaratnam that triggered Rukmini Devi's interest in dance and in Pillai as a possible teacher.<sup>8</sup> As reports of the day affirm,

Sabharanjitham was, however, a meticulous dancer.

Meenakshisundaram also taught Kalyani Ammal's daughters, Jeevaratnam and Rajalakshmi, the former being Meenakshisundaram's very "special" student whom he taught from almost her infancy and so she had started giving public performances at a very young age and whose early death, due to small pox, left her mentor inconsolable for several years. Santha Rao, who spent long spells of time at Pandanallur for her training with the master, narrates interesting stories regarding the master's care for the young disciple:



Jeevaratnam and Rajalakshmi

"I have been told of times when Jeevaratnam as a child would fall asleep after a performance and my teacher would carry her home through the night on his shoulders. Kalyani Ammal gave up her career and devoted herself to Jeevaratnam's training in order to see the fruit of her dreams come true."<sup>9</sup>

Jeevaratnam was such an inspiring dancer that, at times, even the master seemed elated and non-plussed. The master reminisces:

I used to stop singing. The cymbals in my hand would drop into my lap as I sat cross-legged conducting the music. I used to get carried away by the beauty of her acting. I cannot imagine ever again seeing such perfection of expression. And when she danced the purely rhythmic sequences, all the other girls I had trained seemed like wooden dolls by comparison.<sup>10</sup>

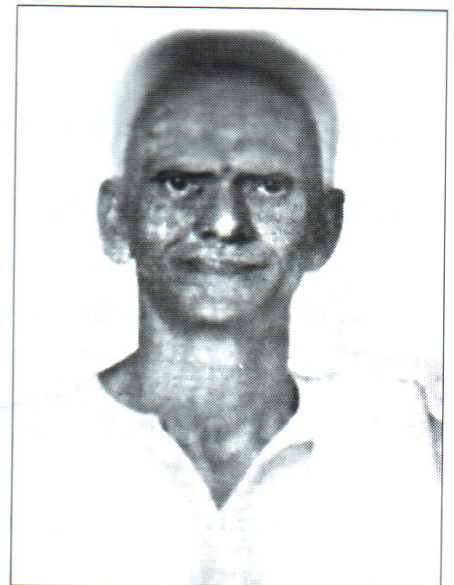
It was the wonderful dance recital of Jeevaratnam that inspired Rukmini Devi to learn Bharatanatyam from Meenakshisundaram. Ram Gopal records that his guru Meenakshisundaram "conducted" several *Kuravanji* dramas and Jeevaratnam

often acted in the role of Valli with such grace and perfection that “he was reduced to tears”.<sup>11</sup> Ram Gopal himself saw her perform in Mysore and was thrilled! As he rightly comments: “Once in every Master’s life comes that perfection, that divinity incarnate”<sup>12</sup> and quotes the words of his guru that “Jeevaratnam was that girl whom I had the great joy of training from the time she first learnt to walk.”<sup>13</sup>

Another important dancer trained by Meenakshisundaram was Pandanallur Jayalakshmi, in whom “beauty and exemplary artistry” were smoothly blended. She married the Raja of Ramnad and left dancing forever, which pained the guru greatly. Out of many other Devadasis of Pandanallur and neighbouring villages mention must be made of Tangachi’s sister Rajamanickam, Rajayi, Kanakammal, Bhanumati-Balachandra sisters are prominent.

Several male nattuvanars were also trained by Meenakshisundaram in singing and the technique of conducting nattuvangam. Among his disciples that made an indelible mark on contemporary Bharatanatyam were Mahavidwan Konetirajapuram Sri Vaidyanath Iyer, Pillai’s son-in-law Ponnaiah Pillai and Balasaraswathi’s guru Kandappa Pillai. Meenakshisundaram’s son-in-law and Pitchaiah Pillai, Chokkalingam Pillai and Tiruvalaputhur Swaminatha Pillai, son of Kalyani Ammal became noteworthy nattuvanars. Papanasam Vadivelu Nattuvanar, whose disciple Bhanumathi, later, earned a name as a performer, had also undergone training under Meenakshisundaram Pillai. The master’s son Muthaiah Pillai was a noted nattuvanar and Gopalakrishnan, Meenakshisundaram’s grandson worked for a long time in a school, established by Leela Ramanathan at Bangalore named after Meenakshisundaram, as a teacher and nattuvanar and now teaches at Chennai. His grandson from his mother’s side, Kittappa Pillai had earned fame as a singer-choreographer, whose presentation of *Sarabhendra Bhupala Kurananji* was a great success. Among Kittapa’s students were Mrinalini Sarabhai, Vyjayanthimala Bali, Hema Malini, Indrani and several others who achieved national and international fame.

Among those that strictly adhered to the tradition and became known for their versatility, the name of Chokkalingam Pillai, (1896-1968), son-in-law of Meenakshisundaram’s brother, comes foremost. He not only learnt from the great guru but served as his



Chokkalingam Pillai

assistant in nattuvangam for nearly three decades. He accompanied his guru to Kalakshetra when Pillai was invited by Rukmini Devi and remained there until 1943 as a teacher and nattuvanar. Well known dancers like Mrinalini Sarabhai, Indrani, Roshan Vajifdar, Rita Devi and several others were his students here. He later joined the Indian Institute of Fine Arts. Several students from different countries learnt Bharatanatyam from him including Ann Brun of Switzerland and Gina Blau of U.S.A.

Similarly Tiruvalaputtur Swaminatha Pillai (1893-1972), son of Meenakshisundaram Pillai's early disciple Kalyani Ammal and the brother of Rajalakshmi and Jeevaratnam, taught Bharatanatyam to students at Madras, Kumbakonam and Pondichery. He received the Sangeeta Nataka Akademi's award in 1969.

Kandappa Pillai (1899-1942) was well known as Balasaraswati's guru and conducted her recitals for a larger part of her life. He was Ponnaiah's (the second of the Tanjore Quartet) great grandson from his mother's side and received training in Nattuvangam from Meenakshisundaram. His father, Nellaiyappa migrated to Madras and earned recognition as the teacher of Mylapore Gauri Ammal and Jayammal. Kandappa, a gifted singer, joined Bala early in his life and stayed with her all through her long career.



Kandappa Pillai

These were some of the major nattuvanars whose adherence to tradition made their work memorable.

### **Disciples form the Non-Traditional families:**

The list of Meenakshisundaram Pillai's disciples from non-traditional families is noteworthy enough to demand our reverence. The guru-sishya lineage shows that all of them contributed, in diverse ways, to the furtherance of Bharatanatyam's growth, expansion and stature as a classical dance form.

### **Rukmini Devi (1904-1986) :**

First among them was, of course, Rukmini Devi Arundale whose persistence to learn the art from Meenakshisundaram Pillai had become fruitful after an year's patient waiting and the guru came to Madras (Chennai) to teach her. Rukmini Devi is credited, justifiably, with the resurrection of Bharatanatyam and making

it more a spiritual medium of expression. She repeatedly asserted that this art would ultimately bring “a cultural renaissance” that “a country which was losing its identity, would be best served by a revival of its traditional arts.” She was an astute institution-builder and her work in nurturing the foremost Arts Institution, the Kalakshetra, gained international recognition.



Rukmini Devi was a recipient of Padmabhushan award from the Government of India, a doctorate from Rabindra Bharathi University, Kolkata and the fellowship of the Sangeeta Nataka Akademi. She received the title “Desikottama” from Shanthiniketan. Rukmini Devi is also known for her outstanding dance dramas including the *Kutrala Kuravanji*, the yakshaganas inspired by the Bhagavata Mela repertoire and a wide variety of classics in the Bharatanatyam dance-drama format. Her striking personality, her discerning and aesthetic eye, her humane concern for the entire humanity made her a towering figure in contemporary cultural and creative world. She paid glowing tributes to her guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai in *Shraddhanjali* thus: “I must say that but for him I would not have had the training and the help which has given me a place in the world of art...”<sup>14</sup>

### Ram Gopal (1912-2003) :



A versatile dancer and imaginative choreographer, Ram Gopal was one of the earliest to have brought worldwide recognition to Bharatanatyam. His whirlwind tours throughout the world and his perception of Indian culture as reflected in Bharatanatyam and, of course, his personal charisma mainly account for the Western World’s positive response to Indian dance.

Ram Gopal, initially trained in Kathakali by Guru Kunju Kurup, later came under the tutelage of Meenakshisundaram Pillai. He went to Pandanallur in the early 40’s to study under Meenakshisundaram Pillai, who taught him, among many other things, the *thandava* portions of the dance “which he did not teach any one until then.”<sup>15</sup> Ram Gopal started an institute for teaching Bharatanatyam at Bangalore where stalwarts like Muthu Kumar Pillai , Kunju Kurup, and Mylapore Gauri Amma

taught. Nina Thimmaiyya, Mrinalini Sarabhai, Leela Ramanadhan, Saroja Khokar, Tara Chaudhary and Kumudini Lakhia studied there from time to time.

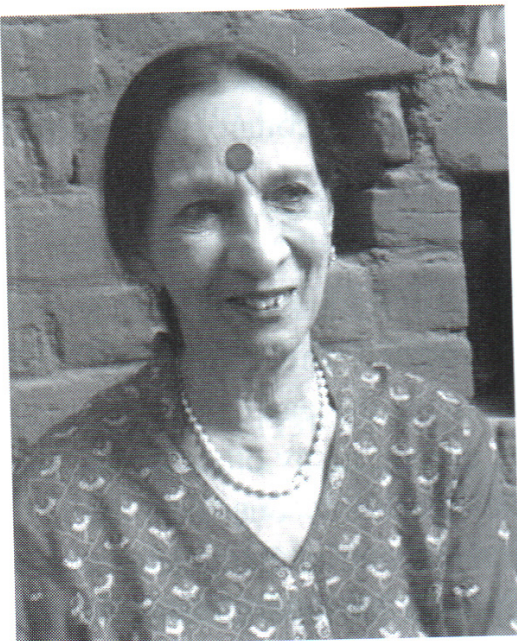
Ram Gopal was superb in presenting the traditional Bharatanatyam compositions with the same purity and exuberance as his Guru had taught him as well as several newly composed compositions choreographed by him.

### **U.S. Krishna Rao and U.K. Chandrabhaga Devi:**

Prof. U.S. Krishna Rao and his wife Chandrabhaga Devi were the first dancing couple of Bharatnatyam who worked relentlessly for the teaching and propagation of the art in Karnataka. Inspired by Ram Gopal they went to "Taatha" in 1943 and had vigorous training under him. They took meticulous care to retain the purity of the art. Through their 50 years of eventful life of teaching, giving lecture demonstrations, performing and choreographing memorable solo items and dance dramas, the Krishna Rao couple endeared themselves to all lovers of dance and their students. Dancers who were trained by the couple include Indrani Rehman, Sonal Mansingh, Sudharani Raghupathi, Pratibha Prahlad and Radha Sridhar. Krishna Rao authored several important books on Bharatanatyam including *A Dictionary of Technical Terms of Bharatnatyam*.



### **Mrinalini Sarabhai :**



Mrinalini Sarabhai (1928 - ) was born into a well-respected family. Her father, G. Swaminatham was a barrister and her mother, Ammu Swaminathan was a wellknown social worker and Member of Parliament. Mrinalini's love for dance, started in her fifth year, took her to several great gurus of the day – first to Muthukumara Pillai (at Kalakshetra) and to Meenakshisundaram Pillai and later to Chokkalingam Pillai. Going through long and strenuous hours of training, she gained the appreciation of her guru who was pleased with her dedication to art. She later learnt Javanese



dance and had also undergone a 6-month acting and stage technique course at the American Academy of Dramatic Art, New York.

Mrinalini married Vikram Sarabhai, eminent scientist, and moved to Ahmedabad with him where she started the now-reputed Darpana Academy of Dance (1948). An eminent dancer and choreographer, Mrinalini developed the centre as a research-cum-performance-oriented institution where the classical dance forms of India are taught along with popular rural forms like puppetry. Her choreographic works, which combine tradition in all its glory with innovation, number more than 60. Major among her choreographic works which reflect her creative best are: *Meghaduta*, *Pallaki Seva Prabandham*, *Malavikagnimitram*, *Usha Parinayam* and *Silappadikaram*. She also choreographed several works which have contemporary social significance with equal *elan* as she had done the traditional subjects.

### **Nataraja Ramakrishna:**

Nataraja Ramakrishna (1923 - ), whose life is strongly intertwined with the performing art traditions of Andhra Pradesh learnt Bharatanatyam under the Pandanallur master. Though it was a short stint of training, it was vigorous and it gave a direction to Nataraja's future activities in restructuring the ancient dance forms like Nava Janardanam and Perini Sivatanavam - the lasya and tandava styles of dance which were taught to him by the great Gurus. Nataraja Ramakrishna authored more than fifty books in English and Telugu on the various aspects of Andhra



Dance traditions. A Padmashri award from the Government of India, 'Bharata Kala Prapoorna' title from the State Sangeet Natak Akademi and several other awards and titles adorned him and bore a fitting testimony to his expertise in the dance traditions of Andhra.

### **Shanta Rao :**

Shanta Rao was hailed as a "vivacious" dancer full of energy. She was born at Mangalore in a Saraswat Brahmin family, which moved to Mumbai (then Bombay) due to her father's business interests. An only child, Shanta's dance interests were initiated by her father's friends including Harindranath Chattopadhyay and G. Venkatachalam, one of the earliest critics of performing arts. After initial and

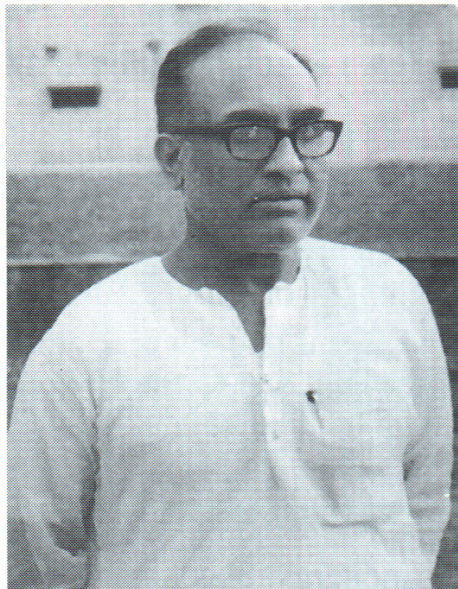


passing interest in Kathak and Manipuri, she opted for Kathakali. She met Vallathol Narayana Menon and received his approval to join Kalamandalam to study Kathakali but the presiding master of the institution, Ramunni Menon, rejected her as a student since Kathakali was the preserve of men until then. After sustained persuasion he consented and she became the first girl student of Kathakali. In Kalamandalam she also became a disciple of Mohini Attam under Guru Krishna Panikkar.

But Shanta's inner urge to learn Bharatanatyam continued unabated. After virtually rejecting all available masters in teaching Bharatanatyam, she at last chose Meenkashisundaram Pillai to be her master. She spent almost seven years, though not continuously, learning Bharatanatyam. Due to her hard work and incisive application she became the "darling" disciple of the master.

After performing extensively both in India and abroad for several years, she settled down in Bangalore working on a new genre of dance called 'Bhama Nrityam'.

### **Kubernath Tanjorkar**



In 1880, the crown prince of the Baroda state, Sayaji Rao II, the Gaekwad married the Tanjore princess. It was customary to send a retinue of servants, maids and dancers along with the princess to her in-law's house. Thus came Kanthamati, a dancer and served in the court of Baroda for over 30 years. Her son, Kubernath, born in 1921, started his training in his eighth year from his mother. When he was sixteen he went to Pandanallur and underwent training from Meenakshisundaram in music and nuttuvangam for three years. He later learnt Hindustani music also. He joined the M.S. University of Baroda's dance department and served there until he retired. Besides being an able nattuvanar, he is also a singer of merit. He is a recipient of the Sangeet Natak Akademi award.

Among other dancers who learnt from the Guru mention must be made of Leela Ramanathan who started an institution of Dance, named after Meenakshisundaram Pillai and also authored a book *Bharatanatyam : Yesterday today and tomorrow*.

Meenakshisundaram's disciples share the same principles of creativity which are rooted in tradition, but lends freedom to innovate and improvise, without sacrificing the purity, elegance and sobriety of Bharatanatyam. Meenakshisundaram Pillai continues to live through the sustaining and remarkable efforts of his disciples. This large galaxy of trail-blazers and their disciples carry the mantle of the art form and carry it far and wide through succeeding generations. Meenakshisundaram Pillai lives on as long as purity of art, expertise in technique and innovation in presentation are respected and followed.

What greater tribute could any disciple pay to that inimitable and unostentatious Guru of Gurus, Meenakshisundaram Pillai?

#### NOTES

1. Ashoke Chatterjee, quoting Shanta Rao's words, *Dances of the Golden Hall*, New Delhi : Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1979, p.38.
2. Ram Gopal, *Rhythm in the Heavens : The Autobiography of Ram Gopal*, London : Secker & Warburg, 1957, p.144.
3. *Dances of the Golden Hall*, p.38.
4. B.M. Sundaram, "A Who's Who of Gurus & Artists," in an article, "Development and Preservation of Bharatanatyam contribution of Isai Vellalars," *Sruti*, No.99-100, p.35.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., p.36.
8. "Rukmini on herself," *Rukmini Devi Arundale Birth Centenary Volume*, ed. by Shakuntala Ramani, Chennai : The Kalakshetra Foundation, 2003, p.37.
9. *Dances of the Golden Hall*, p.38.
10. *Rhythm in the Heavens*, p.144.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Rukmini Devi, "Meenakshisundaram Pillai," *Shraddhanjali*, ed. by Shakuntala Ramani, Chennai : The Kalakshetra Foundation, 2003, p.58.
15. Ram Gopal, as quoted in Sunil Kothari's "Ram Gopal : Interview", *Nartanam*, Vol.III, No.4 (oct. – Dec.2003), P.15.