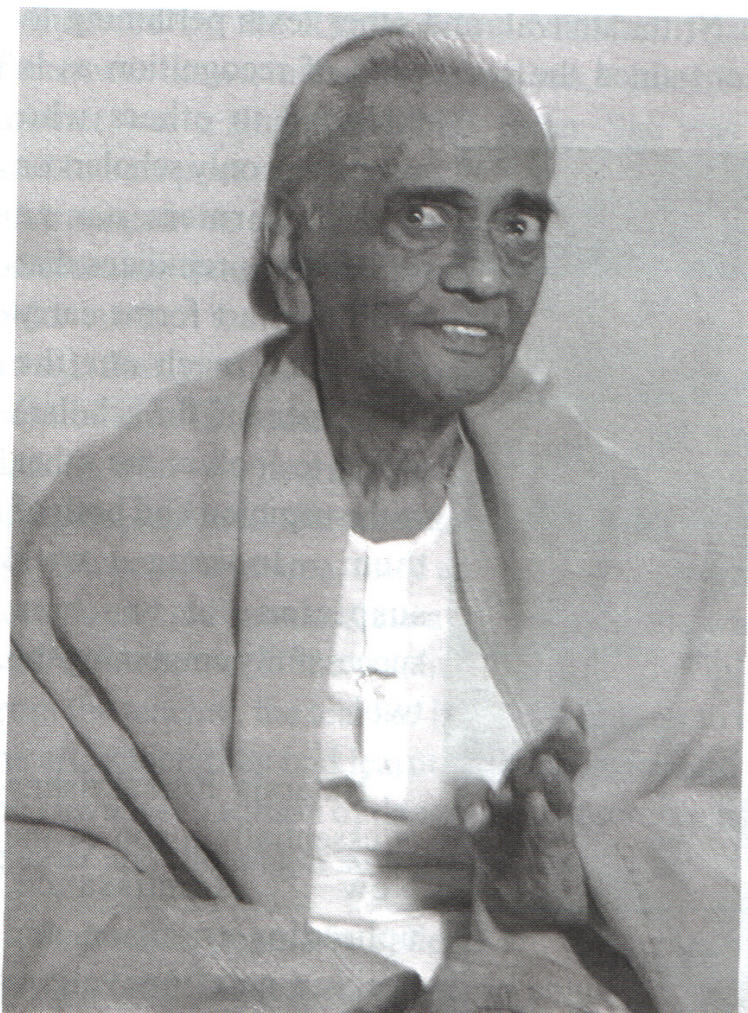


# Nataraja Ramakrishna : Crusader and Visionary

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PROF. M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA

The post-independence resurgence of performing arts owes its rejuvenation to a few pioneering minds on whose creative endeavour and visionary insights rested the future course of these arts. In every art form, all over the country, there arose leaders who combined in themselves the sagacity of the tradition and the creativity



that is needed to satisfy the modern consciousness. In many areas, the scholars led a movement championing the cause of the art form through their intellectual pursuits and critical writings while others furthered the cause by their creative genius and imparting their knowledge to their disciples. In many cases these critical and creative faculties remained separately, both of them together working in unison for the propagation of the form.

In the annals of contemporary Indian dance history, very few performers accredited themselves with dance knowledge outside their own particular area of performance. None looked at

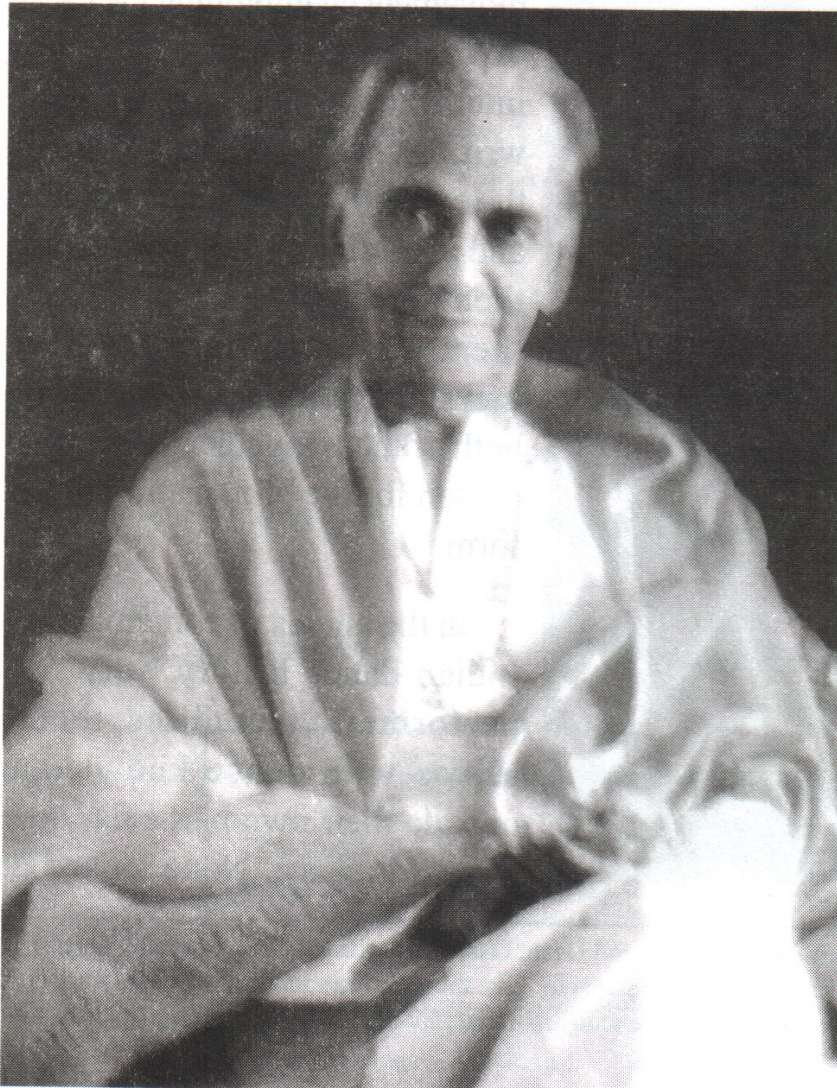
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**M. NAGABHUSHANA SARMA**, formerly Professor and Dean, Osmania University and Central University, is one of the pioneers working in the field of performing arts to give them institutional validity. His works on theatre, folk arts and dance studies have already become study materials for students. He is presently the Chief Editor of *Nartanam*.

their own regional form from a broader Indian perspective both for comparative analysis and for creating a broader frame work for their own form of dance. Nataraja Ramakrishna and the ilk, marginal they may have looked to be when they started their work, have done yeoman service in getting recognition to their regional forms and to look at them from an over all cultural milieu. What happens when you look at a regional form from a national perspective is that you attune it to national standards without losing its basic intrinsic, native characteristics.

Nataraja Ramakrishna is the best scholar - performer in the area of the Dance traditions of Andhra. As a dancer he has combined in himself the dramatic enunciation of bhava as in the 'kelika' dancers attached to the temples or the courts of the zamindars, with the rhythmic flow of graceful movements as in Kathak and with the quick succession of meaningfully suggestive mudras as in Kuchipudi. He has also had the unique opportunity of studying the ancient texts of Natyasastra and Abhinaya Darpana along with Nrittaratnavali and other texts pertaining to regional variations. That he has not gained the same kind of recognition as is

extended to others who were either only scholars or only performers *per se* reflects the prejudices that traditional art forms carry with them, each one (the performer and the scholar) trying to look at the other with suspicion and both of them looking with suspicion at a man successfully combining the two!



Nataraja Ramakrishna is essentially a son of the New Renaissance, upholding tradition and seeking new innovations all the time. His thirst for dance ignited early in life by witnessing a dance performance in his native

village's temple courtyard, of an angelic temple dancer, clad in white and with a glowing face and divine demeanor (that was the picture of the unknown dancer as Nataraja remembered her). The scene haunted him so much that he unconsciously decided that dancing would be his profession and passion. This was when Ramakrishna was eight years old!

Belonging to a wealthy family in the small town of Razole, West Godavari district in Andhra Pradesh Ramakrishna was born in Bali Islands to Ramamohana Rao and Damayanthi Devi on March 21, 1923. He was the second son in a progeny of three. He had an elder brother, Shyamsundar, and a younger sister, Sarada. The names indicate how strongly his father was influenced by the Ramakrishna Mission. His father was drawn towards spiritualism, while his mother was a singer of a high order. She was said to be a poet as well. Ramakrishna was after



Ramakrishna & his sister Sarada

his mother in his aesthetic aspirations. When young Ramakrishna, aged 14, persisted on learning dance at any cost and trying ways and means to fulfil his desire, the older brother, working then at Sri Kalahasti, a temple town near Tirupati, took him away, firstly to protect him from their father's wrath and secondly to seek possibilities of finding a teacher for him. Fortunately for both, an old Devadasi dancer, who was nearing seventy at the time, was approached and she grudgingly accepted and said she would see what she could do in this regard. The old lady, Nayudupeta Rajamma, once attached to the temple of Lord Shiva, at Sri Kalahasti soon found in Ramakrishna a true sishya, one who was keen to learn the art as she was in her teens. If the teacher found the disciple deadly keen in getting the best from the teacher, the teacher herself was keen to tell the boy what all she knew, for the art, which they had learnt with diligence and devotion was going waste, since the Devadasi tradition of dancing was prohibited by an act. It looked as though the teacher and the taught suited each other.

Rajamma, popularly called Raji, was a rage in her younger days. A scholar in Sanskrit and Telugu, an expert in abhinaya and in classical music, she was the very epitome of the Devadasi dance tradition, which had by then become extinct due to the Devadasi act. She would often bemoan that their caste was once enshrined for wrong reasons and now, their dance was again prohibited for the same wrong reasons. She would often say, before a newly - initiated disciple, what a loss this

was to the nation. Ramakrishna only empathized with her feelings not really knowing what they meant for her. This always lingered in his mind and, years later, when he took up to propagate the abhinaya traditions of the Devadasis, he always felt that such a great art should not just die away!

Ramakrishna learnt what his guru taught him and the guru taught him what she knew (and she knew so much) - and she taught him not only what he should learn, but also how to present them before an audience. The *Abhinaya* school of Andhra dance prevalent among the temple and court dancers essentially laid stress on *sattvika*, with *hasthabhinaya* as a close second. *Vachika*, for them co-exists with *sattvika* because every dancer belonging to the tradition would sing for her own dance. There might be a co-singer (*vantha*), but the dancer must be a singer-dancer. It is customary that *sattvika* elaboration is done with the dancer sitting and *interpreting* the text, in multiple ways, instead of explaining the meaning of the text as is done in other styles of dancing.

In his two years of learning, working twelve to sixteen hours each day, Ramakrishna soon became adept in rendering 'padams', mainly of Kshetranya as well as the entire text of *Gita Govinda* which formed half of his teacher's repertoire. He learnt *Javalis* and other 'Sringara' compositions. It is a paradox that Ramakrishna had to start his learning from the end, for *Sattvikaabhinaya* came later in the usual training of dance than *angika*. What he learnt at Sri Kalahasthi laid a strong base for every creative activity that he embarked upon in later years.

His teacher also taught him to attune his voice with the tinkling noise that reverberated the temple precincts when the temple pillar was struck with a stone.

This helped him in later years to work on the "vibration theory" of sound and its impact on dance.



When the elders found that Ramakrishna had not mended his ways, he was sent back to the Ramakrishna Mutt in Madras, because his father was a staunch follower of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. His education and spiritual upbringing was entrusted to the care of Swamy Saswatananda, who loved the young Ramakrishna and saw in him the potentials of becoming a Sanyasi! (Ramakrishna would gleefully say now that he *is* a sanyasi, clad in

white!) He taught him how to meditate, read with him all the Saiva and Vaishnava texts in the library. The Swami also explained to him the intricacies of the religious texts and the oneness of Godhood. Ramakrishna spent his evenings in the Kapaleswara Swami temple in Mylapore. He was particularly attracted towards a temple priest who used several mudras while worshipping Siva. He found many of the mudras were akin to the ones he learnt at Sri Kalahasti. He then started reading the *agama* texts in the Ramakrishna Mutt library.

It was here that Ramakrishna studied Ananda Kumara Swami's books. This intense relationship with dance led Ramakrishna in search of another teacher. He went to Pandanallur to further his dance training under the illustrious Guru, Meenakshi Sundaram Pillai. He was then old and Ramakrishna found him temperamental. Since the Guru insisted on Ramakrishna learning it from a scratch, and since Ramakrishna thought that he was already taught the *hastabhinaya* that the Pandanallur master was trying to teach him, the learning soon came to an end.

Ramakrishna, while continuing his practice, was continuously exposed to contemporary dance traditions prevalent in the then Madras State. Balasaraswathi was the one who was for him a 'total' dancer - "her *charis* and *angaharas* were minimal" but her *hastabhinaya* and *sattvika* were akin to the ones he also learnt. He would attend a performance of Balasaraswathi, get hold of the new compositions and choreograph them at home. This gave Ramakrishna an opportunity to try at choreography for his own sake.

His father, by then old and grew more sentimental, thought that even Madras and Ramakrishna Mutt did not deter Ramakrishna from dance practice and so this time he sent his son, now a matriculate, to Nagpur to study in a college. Ramakrishna



duly joined in a college, but never stopped his search for new avenues of learning. At Nagpur, Nataraj got in touch with a Kathak dancer Siddhaji. He introduced him to one Champa Bai, a singer. In one of his sojourns Ramakrishna befriended a young man who encouraged him to dance. Champa Bai sang several songs on Sri Krishna: "Shyam Sundar Vanamali", "Jago Mohana" and so on. For Ramakrishna, dancing to the songs on Krishna was not new. When he danced to the songs, the audience, though few, were thrilled. At the end of the night-long programme, Champa Bai was in tears and said that Lord Krishna had



Kalyanji & Karthikji of Rayagarh Samsthan



Kalyanji

appeared before her that night.

Ramakrishna's virtuosity in dance and his improvisational abilities reached Raja Ganapati Rao Pandya, the Prince of Bhandara Samsthan near Nagpur, a great patron of arts. Kalyanji and Karthikji of Rayagarh state danced in Bhandara Prince's court. With the initiative of a friend, Ram Bhav Sir Deshpande, Ramakrishna also was asked to dance before the Prince and a court full of patrons, singers and dancers. He (Ramakrishna) requested Kalyanji to lend their tabla master who obliged him with delight. Ramakrishna's performance went on and on. Rambhav, who gave vocal support, sang "Parso More Nayaanme

Nanda Lal..." and during the memorable performance everyone hailed Ramakrishna as "Nataraj" which later became his family name.

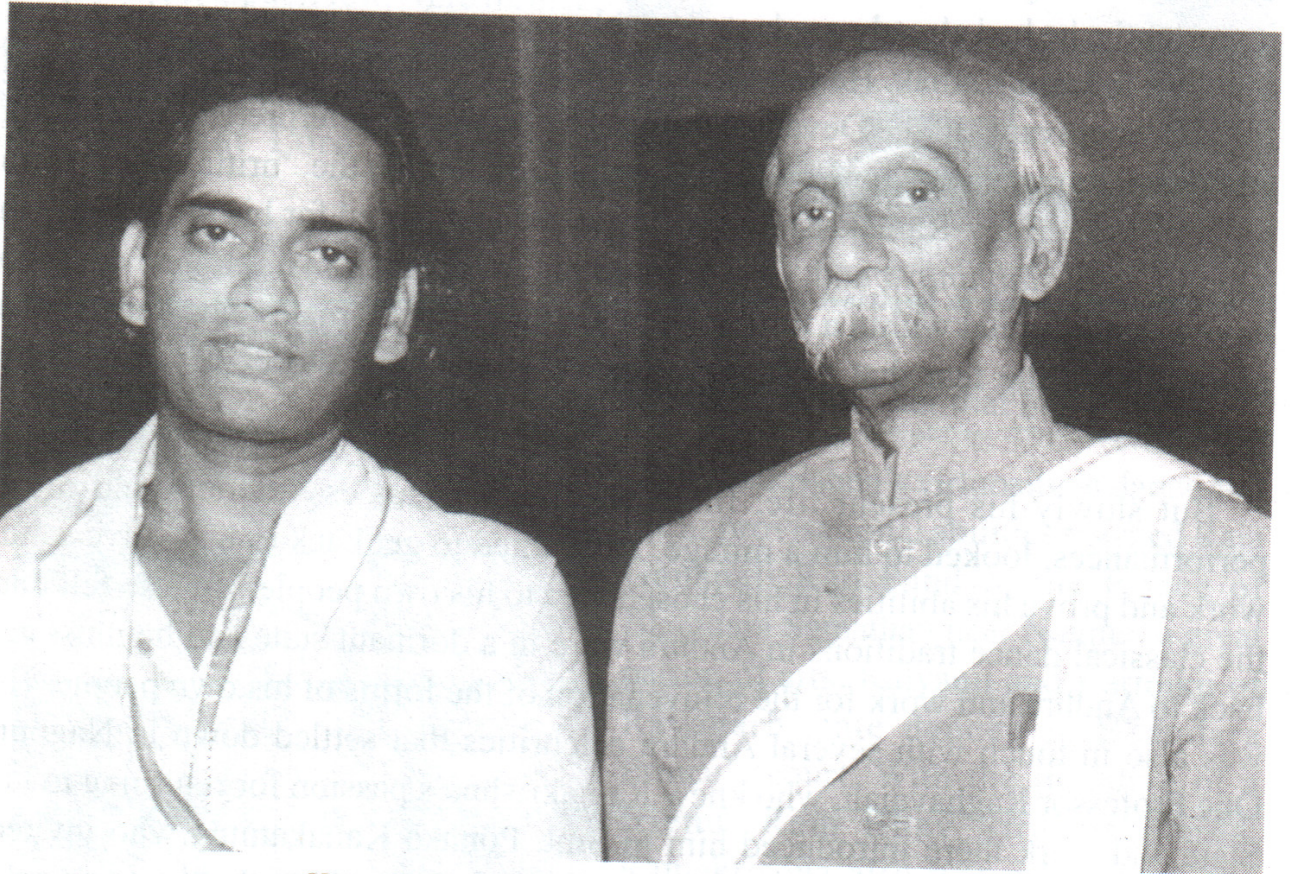
Before he got the patronage of the Bhandara zamindar, Ramakrishna spent a miserable life. He had no place to go, no one to look after. His father, who came to see him gave him ample money and asked him to come back home and live in plenty - but he has to leave his dance completely. He left the money on the table. Ramakrishna went to his father the next day and returned the money. His father was so angry that he said that if he were a man, he should never use the family name and never refer to his parents publicly. Ramakrishna obliged his father and never gave their names. (This is the first time he revealed his identity.)

The three years he spent in the court were very fruitful for during this time he completed his graduation and got admission into Post - Graduation, but more importantly, he had already graduated in abhinaya, and now joined as a disciple of Sundarji to learn Kathak. He felt the performance of Kathak in the courts was just like the "mejuvani" of the Devadasi dance. The performer interpreted a text sitting at a place. Ramakrishna now became equally proficient in the 'nritta' aspect from his Kathak maestro. Ramakrishna was respected and feared for his proficiency in singing, in *hastabhinaya* and, of course, in his *sattvikabhinaya*. No one dared to have a dance recital within a time span of six months if Ramakrishna danced at a place, due to the fear that their performance would prove to be a whimper by comparison.

But slowly his present life, filled with performances, honours and more performances, looked to him a mirage. He wanted to get back to his native state, work and prove his abilities in his chosen area to his own people. He also felt that the classical dance traditions in Andhra were in a dormant state and he must get back to Andhra and work for the rejuvenation of the forms of his own people. He was also in touch with several Andhra celebrities that settled down in Nagpur. One Professor Raghavaiah, who knew Ramakrishna's passion for returning to his State and work there introduced him to Smt. Ponaka Kanakamma who invited Ramakrishna to stay at Nellore and start his work. It was here that he came into contact with Ayyanki Thandava Krishna, another Kuchipudi scholar - performer, who introduced Ramakrishna to Chittajallu Venkataratnam, a Devadasi and a maestro in abhinaya.

Ramakrishna had started his work in right earnest to propagate dance among the educated. He started writing articles on dance; he gave demonstration lectures on dance in general, but very often talked about the differences between the North

Indian dance practices and Andhra's, especially the abhinaya styles. It was here that he published his first popular book on dance - "Nrityanjali". Ponaka Kanakamma, his mentor at Nellore was a great freedom fighter and her house was virtually a resort for poets, writers and patriots. Well-known dance critics like Jammalamadaka Madhavarama Sarma and Vedala Tiruvenkatacharyulu used to come there, extend their stay and have night-long discussions on dance with Ramakrishna. It was also here that he met and later became close to Prof. Vissa Appa Rao, a knowledgeable critic of Andhra dance and music traditions. After he saw Nataraja's demonstration, he gave a copy of his published work on "Kshetrayya Padams" and said reverentially that he alone could dance them to bring out their intrinsic value and requested Ramakrishna to write a 'work book' (*aata kramam*) on Kshetrayya Padams.



Nataraja Ramakrishna with Prof. Vissa Appa Rao

Ramakrishna became a member of Prof. Appa Rao's family later in Guntur where Prof. Appa Rao was the Principal of the University College of Science. Ramakrishna followed him to Visakhapatnam. He persuaded Ramakrishna to make an in-depth study of the performing methodology of Kshetrayya padams. Ramakrishna wrote the methodology for many songs. When Prof. Vissa Appa Rao



passed away, Ramakrishna tore them off in utter despair and agony. But, Nataraj's performative analyses of a few 'padams' are retained as they were printed in *Natyakala*, a monthly journal published by the State Sangeet Natak Akademi.

His study, performance and teaching took him to Nellore, from Nellore to Guntur and from Guntur to Visakhapatnam, the later becoming a launching pad for his fame as a speaker and writer on dance. He was invited to come to Visakhapatnam by Sri Vaddadi Bapiraju, a connoisseur of arts and especially of dance. His house used to be an art lovers paradise. He saw Ramakrishna conducting a dance recital of Shyama Kaundinya, his disciple, at Guntur and requested him to come to Vizag. When he accepted, Sri Bapiraju was so pleased that he saw to it that Ramakrishna was comfortable. Bapiraju's house was a rendezvous of dancers and singers as he took great delight and pride to serve the cause of these performing arts. He was so fond of dance that even by then, he brought his brother's two daughters - Uma and Sumati - under the tutelage of another Guru, but now put them under Ramakrishna.

But the greatest service that Bapiraju did to the art was to bring that illustrious Kuchipudi Guru, Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry to Vizag to teach Ramakrishna and, of course, his own nieces, Uma (Rama Rao) and Sumathy (Kaushal). Ramakrishna was greatly impressed by Sri Sastry's *hastabhinaya* which he learnt



Guru Shri Vedantam Laxminarayana Sastry

from him. Especially delightful was the way in which Sastry garu used his mudras to interpret an object / person with a 'cluster of images', which, when shown in quick succession, envisions a whole story before the mind's eye. Ramakrishna also learnt Bhamakalapam from Sastry garu. In later years, Ramakrishna combined the expressive modules of Nayudupeta Rajamma, rhythmic variations of Kathak and the sensitivity of *mudrabhinaya* of Sastry garu to form into a unified style of his own.

These were also the days of Ramakrishna's intense activity as a choreographer and researcher and he was known all over the South for his astute demonstration-lectures, which showed his analytical and performative capabilities. For his popular lectures on Kuchipudi and comparative dance traditions, he was honoured by a number of organizations. Especially noteworthy were the Andhra Nataka Kala Parishad's honour for his services to dance and the Andhra University's "Kala Prapoorna", an Honorary Doctorate (*Honoris causa*). He toured extensively with members of his institute 'Nritya Niketan' giving performances. He also toured from Mukhalingam to Kumbhakonam researching into the 'lasya' tradition practised by women both in temples and courts. He stressed that the style of dance, emphasizing on abhinaya, was the forte of all the female dancers in the width and breadth of South India. He also made it a point to meet the old dancers in the nooks and corners of South India to understand and comparatively assess the traditions. When he went to Kakinada for a lecture demonstration, a respected patron of arts, Kommireddi Suryanarayana enquired as to why he was mingling Hindi, Telegu and English, while speaking. Ramakrishna then realized the need to learn his native language to be able to speak fluently in it and within the next six months mastered the language and could put forward any complicated idea concerning arts in chaste Telugu. This became a double-edged weapon: not only did it help him in explaining the nuances of dance traditions, but also enabled him to write research articles and books to reach wider audiences.

It was this mission that Ramakrishna had undertaken that Andhra art traditions needed exposure both in terms of giving performances all over the country and also explaining their intricacies - had ultimately landed him in Hyderabad in 1955 when the dream of a larger state, with all the Telugu speaking people under one umbrella, was being realized. He was nominated to the newly constituted State Sangeet Natak Akademi in 1956 and became its spokesman on dance.

Ramakrishna's work in the Akademi was god-sent to realize his dreams of propagating Andhra traditions of dance both outside Andhra and abroad. Just at that time an unfortunate incident at Delhi sparked off an unnecessary controversy in Andhra. At an All-India classical dance festival held at Delhi, a young girl, Kanchnamala was invited to perform Kuchipudi. Vissa Appa Rao accompanied the team and P.V.Rajamannar, Chairman of the Central Akademi was also present. The committee of experts (?) who met on the occasion felt that Kuchipudi could not be accepted as a classical dance form. This saddened and angered Nataraja Ramakrishna as it did other Telugu art-loving people. At the instance of Ramakrishna, the State Sangeet Natak Akademi decided to organize a seminar on

Kuchipudi and other classical dance traditions of Andhra. Ramakrishna was its convenor. Experts and performers from all over Andhra attended the seminar, though none attended from Madras. Nirmala Joshi, the then secretary, Central Sangeet Natak Akademi, attended the sessions on all the three days and saw each of the performances. Vedantam Satyam performed Bhamakalapam to the astonishment of Nirmalaji. Nataraja himself sang, demonstrated and talked about the richness of Kuchipudi.



Vedantam Satyam performing at the Festival

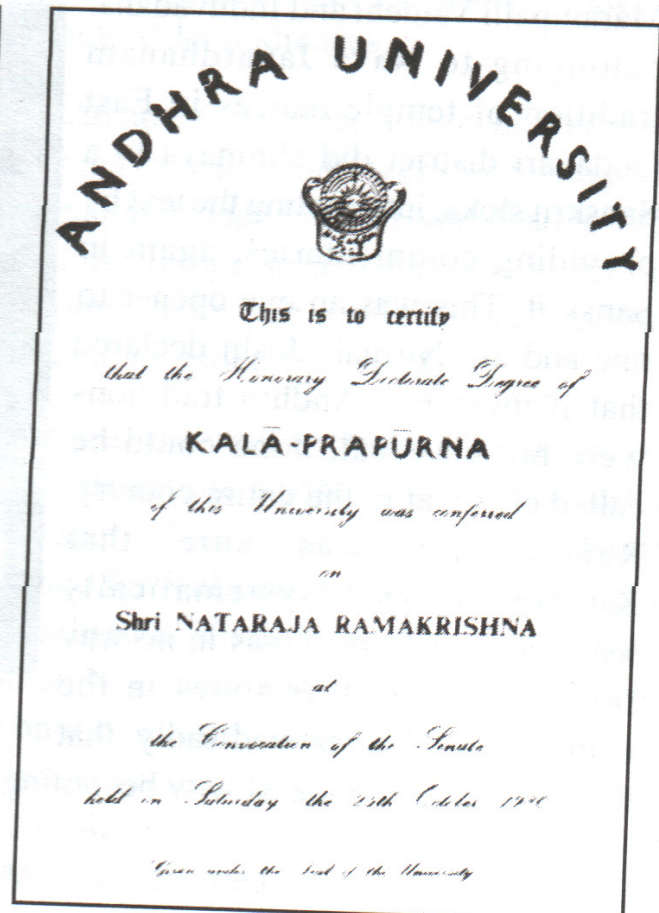
Ramakrishna, as the convenor of the Festival, widened the scope of the festival to include demonstrations of a few of the Devadasis. Marampalli Vaidehi and Induvadana, belonging to Nava Janardhanam tradition of temple dances in East Godavari district did abhinaya to a Sanskrit sloka, interpreting the text by providing commentaries, again in Sanskrit. This was an eye opener to one and all. Nirmala Joshi declared that if these two Andhra traditions were not classical, none could be called classical in the entire country. Ramakrishna was sure that Kuchipudi, when systematically learnt and performed was in no way inferior to the other styles in the country. He also realized sadly, that the abhinaya school is slowly becoming extinct.



Vaidehi & Induvadana giving a demonstration

Ramakrishna now has undertaken the task of organizing an all-India Dance Festival to further establish the credentials of both Kuchipudi and the abhinaya style. Meanwhile, he wrote several books on dance and dance traditions both in Telugu and English. Many of them were awarded prizes and his name became a synonym for dance studies.

Ramakrishna's efforts in showcasing the Andhra traditions for a national audience became fruitful in the All-India Dance Festival, conducted under the joint auspices of the Central and the State Akademis in 1964 at Hyderabad. The State Akademi invited the veteran Kuchipudi dancer and movie director, Vedantam Raghavaiah to preside over the celebrations and receive a title, 'Bharata Kala Prapoorna'. Nataraj, as the convenor of the Festival saw to it that all stalwarts participated in it. Balasaraswathi, Sambhu Maharaj, the Jhaveri Sisters, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma, Annabathula Buli Venkataratnam, Bonthalakoti Jagannadham and teams of Kathak and Kathakali and scores of others participated. Experts talked about each form : D N Patnaik on Odissi, Kavalam Narayana Paniker on Kathakali, Banda Kanakalingeswari spoke on Kuchipudi and Ramakrishna himself gave a detailed account of the temple and ritual dances of Andhra traditions. All this was done by Ramakrishna single - handly, though with the blessings of R.B.Ramakrishnam Raju, the President and the active support



of Pasala Suryachandra Rao, the Secretary of the State Akademi. A new chapter in the history of Kuchipudi has started.

Ramakrishna's unstinted devotion to the cause of dance, especially belonging to Andhra traditions, brought him several laurels. He was honoured with 'Kala Prapoorna' by the Andhra University, and "Bharata Kala Prapoorna" by the A.P. State Sangeet Natak Akademi. He has researched into our ancient traditions and brought forth their essence in his books on dance. He was choreographing several 'padams' for his disciples. He had always been choreographing shorter pieces for them - which included the Geeta Govindam songs, Kshetrayya Padams and occasionally those of Sarangapani. He started choreographing full length ballets. Most memorable are Kumarasambhavam and Meghasandesam - both by Kalidasa, both of them drawing critical applause.



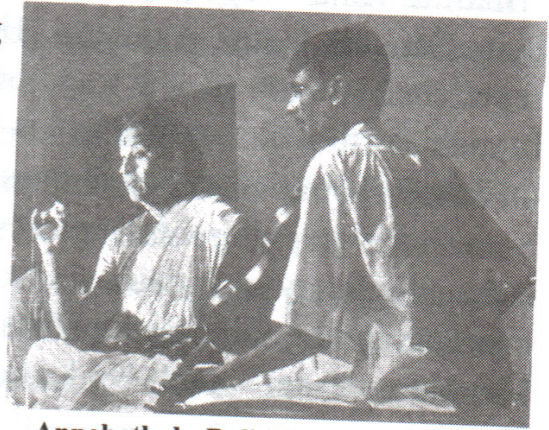
Nataraj receiving the 'Silver Kalasha' from Shri Kailash Nath Katju, Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh



Discussion Session for the rehearsal of a ballet

Especially notable was the selection of Kumarasambhavam as the best production in the Kalidas Samaroh at Ujjain in 1963. The production received a silver 'kalasa', a plaque and a citation from the then Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh, Kailashnath Katju. This was a memorable occasion for Andhra.

Ramakrishna, meanwhile, concentrated on Andhra's *lasya* tradition which was hitherto the proud treasure of the Devadasis alone. He learnt the two versions of Bhama Kalapam, one from Vadantam Laxminarayana Sastry and the other by Pendyala Satyabhama, an expert performer in the abhinaya tradition. Since Kuchipudi had come of age and there were several stalwarts performing and propagating it, Ramakrishna thought that he should now devote his time for getting recognition to the abhinaya tradition. With his past experience as a field worker and researcher and with the help of Annabathula Buli Venkataratnamma, Ramakrishna went from door to door to see if any traditional Devadasi dancers still remembered their tradition. To his astomishment he located sixteen such great performers and brought them on to one platform. He was singularly responsible for doing a seminar - cum - demonstration lecture series in 1970 at Rajahmundry and called it "Abhinaya Sadassu". All the traditional court and temple dancers were diffident and indifferent in the morning session of the first day, but during the remaining days opened up to exhibit their specialized talent. Thus came Annabathula Buli Venkataratnamma doing Bhama Kalapam, Saride Manikyamma demonstrating a rare art form like 'Adhyatma Ramayanam', Duggirala Jagadamba, a sloka and China Gani Raju, a padam. It was a feast to the eyes and ears of connoisseurs and people attending it wondered how such a great art could vanish with the stroke of a pen or legislation?



Annabathula Buli Venkataratnamma demonstrating an Abhinaya piece

This memorable event in the annals of the history of Andhra dance resulted in two remarkable follow up actions: one, to arrange Buli Venkataratnamma's workshop for young dancers in Hyderabad followed by a workshop and series of demonstration features on abhinaya and on 'Adhyatma Ramayanam' by Saride Manikyamma and others and then by starting a special training programme to be given by Manikyamma at the Nizamabad Music and Dance College.

Ramakrishna's researches now turned to reconstruct the various oral texts belonging to the *agama*, *kucheri* and *Bhagavata* traditions. He took recourse to

Navajanardanam, a text performed in the nine Janardana temples and the Kunti Madhava temples in East Godavari district and now ceased to exist. A handful of scholar-performers were still alive when Ramakrishna undertook to revive it. In 1980, when the State Sangeet Natak Akademi was trifurcated into Sangeeta, Nritya and Natak Akademies, Nataraja Ramakrishna was the natural choice for the Presidentship of the Nritya Akademi. Under his presidentship, and with the close association of expert temple and kucheri dancers he revived the “ata kramam”, the performance manual of Navajarnardanam, the version of Bhama Kalapam prevalent in the East Godavari temples. He also chose one of his more talented disciples, Kala Krishna, to undergo rigorous training in the art. Kala Krishna, who learnt Navajanardanam and Agama and Alaya nrityas from great Gurus like Annabathula Satyabhama, Saride Maniyamma and Nataraja Ramakrishna is one of the very few who learnt this traditional dance form in toto and is trying to keep the tradition alive.

Ramakrishna also centered his attention on Kuchipudi training programme for Teachers. Nataraja Ramakrishna and Guru Vempati Chinna Satyam, the Advisor of the Nritya Akademi, proposed that a training programme for teachers of Kuchipudi dance would standardize the syllabus and the teaching methodology. The training programme was very timely and was very enthusiastically received when Guru Vempati conducted it in the Kuchipudi village.



**The Trimurti-s of Kuchipudi Rejuvenation : Gurus Vempati Chinna Satyam, Nataraja Ramakrishna and Vedantam Satyanarayana Sarma**

Similarly deep was Ramakrishna’s interest in the Folk traditions of dance in Andhra. He, along with a few friends, had already completed a survey of the folk performing arts of the State to showcase them in Hyderabad in two glorious Folk Festivals. He was responsible for validating the Toorpu Bhagavatham tradition of the northern districts of Andhra. Similarly, he also took upon himself to propagate the Chindu Bhagavatham tradition of Telangana and help its revival.

Ramakrishna's efforts to consolidate his work and perpetuate the Andhra traditions of dance to the succeeding generations are well-taken. His belief that unless these art traditions are channelised into systems of disciplined study, such a perpetuation is not possible. He wrote several books and articles on the general nature of the two systems of dance that are prevalent in our country from time immemorial - the Thandava style embedded in the all - male, dance - drama tradition and the Lasya style, practised by women. The Natya Mela tradition, already known all over the world, is reflected largely in the Kuchipudi Yakshagana and the Nattuva Mela tradition is seen in the temple and kucheri dances. Ramakrishna firmly believed that these two traditions must exist side by side and have much in common in the early phase of the learning system.

Eversince he brought together all the practitioners of the lasya tradition on to one platform at Rajahmundry in 1970 and discussed the problems in teaching, he listened to their woes that their dance tradition was vitiated by their being condemned in the name of caste. They were willing to co - operate in any effort to propagate them. They all proposed that a new name would eliminate the stigma attached. On the advice of the pundits and the practitioners, the forum of the dancers decided that it might be called "Andhra Natyam" since the Bharatam practised is ancient and represents the very essence of the 'lasya' tradition. Ramakrishna is also instrumental for its accreditation at the University levels of instruction. No one had any doubt about the worth and veracity of the rich tradition and the need to learn it / teach it, (since the present day Bharata Natyam is largely dependent upon the lasya tradition prevalent in that region), some object the nomenclature used. That the tradition is to be continued, its practice perpetuated and retained is



**Ramakrishna at the Abhinaya Sadas**



Ramakrishna's desire and scholar practitioners must find ways and means not to allow such an art tradition to be extinct.

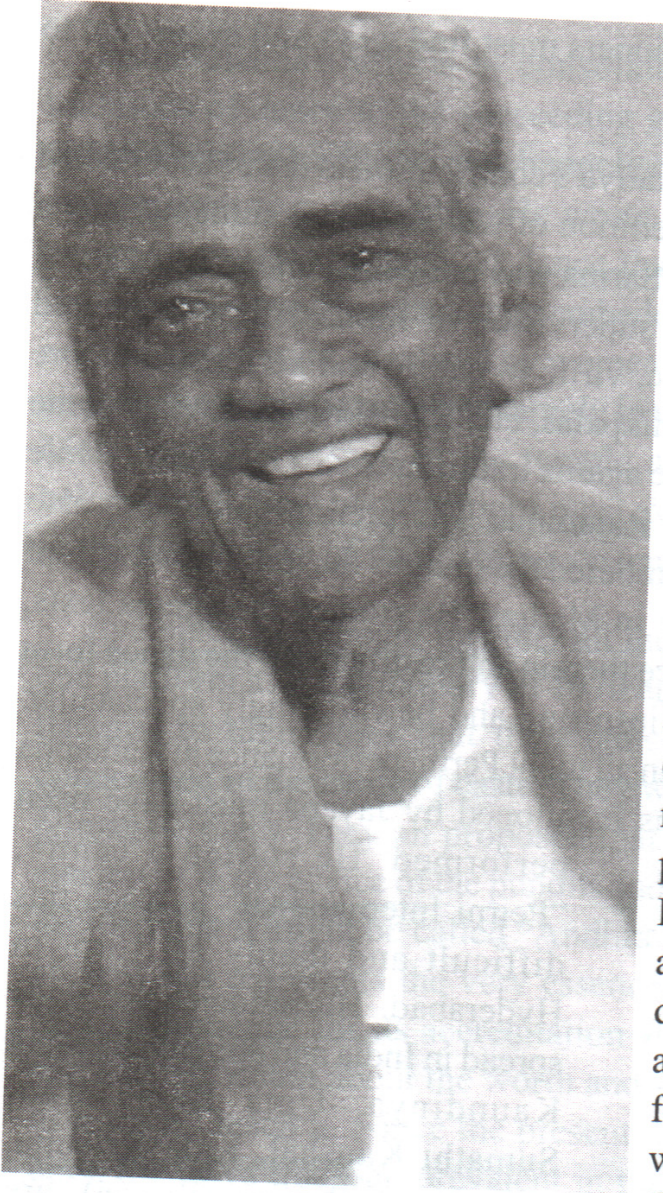
Ramakrishna's researches into the Kakatiya's contribution to dance as reflected in Jayapa Senani's *Nritta Ratnavali* ( an edition of which, with commentary by a great scholar, Rallapalli Ananthakrishna Sarma was published under the aegis of the State Akademi and under the direct supervision of Ramakrishna), revealed that Jayapa mentioned a "Prerana" dance, virile in nature and performed before Lord Shiva invoking the God, the ashta dikpalas, etc. Ramakrishna already came across some jatis when he first studied the agama traditions in Sri Kalahasti, while undergoing training under Nayudupeta Rajamma. The prerana jatis were also published in Bharatarnava. He also remembered the mudras the temple priest used at the Kapaleswara temple in Mylapore in Madras. He studied the agama texts, especially detailing the traditions of dance therein and restructured the dance form "Perini". This invocative dance is awe inspiring and bewilderingly spectacular. Ramakrishna took pains to choreograph an all night Perini performance at Ramappa temple, where many of the dance forms mentioned by Jayapa must have been

performed. He started a centre, "Peirni International" to teach this difficult and manly art form in Hyderabad. His students are wide spread in India and abroad : Shyama Kaundinya, Uma Rama Rao, Sumathi Kaushal, Kala Krishna, Usha Datar, Roxena (Russia) are only a few.

Ramakrishna's recent obsession has been the construction of a memorial to the legendary dancer Taramati, a court dancer of the Asaf Jahi King, Kuli Kutb Shah. He convinced people that Taramati, a dancer and Premavati, a singer - both of them sisters - who lived and practised the arts in Taramati Baradari reflected the essence of Indian art traditions which never had caste and religious discriminations.



*Royal Legend Relived!*



The Government respectfully conceded the request made by Ramakrishna and renovated the present monument. It has become a place for an annual festival of music and dance, reflecting the cosmopolitan culture of Andhra.

With failing health and an aspiring mind Nataraja Ramakrishna is a restless propagator; a crusader of whatever is rich in Andhra traditions. He would have been a superb dancer and a greater choreographer, but he chose not to highlight himself in dance, but to highlight Andhra's dance culture in and outside the State. Similar is the case with regard to teaching and research. He has published over thirty books, both in English and Telugu. Several of them are award-winning ones. Besides the work done by him in this area, he wants more and more scholars to devote their time for research in the dance traditions. He worked as a Visiting Professor in the Central University for several years and

his emphasis has always been to enthuse and guide his students and make them choose areas concerning Andhra dance traditions.

A simple man, with meagre needs, Ramakrishna is a visionary of a rare kind, who combined in himself all the noble qualities of a leader. He was given the Sangeet Natak Award (New Delhi) and the Government of India honoured him with 'Padmashri'. Several prestigious associations honoured him - a Bharata Kala Prapoorna, a Professor Emeritus, an innovator, choreographer, researcher, but above all a crusader for the cause of Andhra's multiple dancing traditions.