

In search of excellence in transitional times : The Unified Vision of Guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai

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(Meenakshisundaram Pillai belonged to an ancient family of nattuvanars of Pandanallur, a village near Kumbakonam, whose ancestry can be traced back to Subbaraya Nattuvanar who was a dance master at the Tanjore court and the earliest traceable ancestor of Meenakshisundaram Pillai. Subbaraya Nattuvanar's sons were the famous Tanjore quartet, credited with defining and refining the present Bharatanatyam format, Ponnaiah, Chinnaiah, Vadivelu and Sivanandam. Meenakshisundaram Pillai was Ponnaiah's daughter, Periyakutty Ammal's son. Into this revered family of Bharatanatyam vidwans and nattuvanars was born Meenakshisundaram Pillai on the eighth day of Purattasi in the Tamil calender of Sukla, September 22, 1869, to Satyamurthy, a wellknown musician and dance master.

Meenakshisundaram Pillai lost his father in his childhood and was brought up in Tanjavur by his sister and her husband Kumaraswamy Nattuvanar, from whom he had his earlier training in Bharatanatyam. He later became a disciple of Mahadeva Nattuvanar, a descendant of Sivanandam of Tanjavur. It was here that Meenakshisundaram Pillai received his training in the art of Bharatanatyam, in nattuvangam and the languages – Tamil, Telugu and Sanskrit. He had been trained in music here and he had also special training in Telugu from a venerable pundit, Vidwan Venkataswami Odayar. He had had a thorough grounding in music and was also an able violinist.)

To a present-day student of Bharatanatyam studies, Guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai looks a towering personality, whose vision and

direction shaped the destinies of the art form. His arduous journey from his traditional milieu into an alien world, perhaps a world of future possibilities might seem today an ordinary course of “choice” made, but for him, at that point of time, must have been, as evidenced by his own pronouncements and from those of his early disciples, very disheartening and disturbing, projecting an uncertain trajectory. Pillai, a simple and steadfastly orthodox soul was born and brought up in a tradition which gave him material well-being, professional satisfaction and, perhaps, spiritual solace. But, transitions in art reception have always been volcanic, disturbing the equanimity of an existing calmness, of practitioners.

The volcano came by way of a request. Rukmini Devi, inspired after seeing the heart-throbbing performances of devadasis at the Music Academy Hall, wanted to learn the art from the dancers’ very own teacher. As it turned out to be, it was Meenakshisundaram Pillai who resided at his native village Pandanallur near Tanjavur. When he was approached, he intuitively and vehemently negated the idea of teaching a Brahmin lady. As Rukmini Devi was busy building the Kalakshetra, she couldn’t probably move away from Madras and so a subsequent request suggested that he should teach Rukmini Devi the art at Madras itself. He refused the proposal on two counts¹:

Eventhough he was considered one of the greatest Natuvanars of those times, he stayed for the most part of his life in his village. It was one of the reasons why he refused to take on Rukmini Devi as a pupil which would mean staying in the environs of the city. Also she was of the brahmin caste and in the tradition-bound, caste ridden atmosphere of those days it was unthinkable that she would take to dance seriously.

Also Rukmini Devi herself noted²:

“He (Pillai) was totally against my learning the dance. In those days, caste was paramount in everything and he thought it would

be sacrilege to teach me, a high caste Brahmin lady, to perform *Sadir*.”

And, as things turned out to be, he had to change his intuitive opposition to condescending acceptance by heeding to the advice of well-meaning benefactors and persuasive friends³. He accepted to teach a non-devadasi disciple and also to travel to Madras to teach her, both of which received his vehement opposition at first. But when once he responded favourably and agreed even to the changing milieu, it meant that he was conscious of the orders of change. The options were clear - to continue to teach his temple dancer-disciples, the clan of which was slowly diminishing in numbers, if not in quality and whose professional continuance was more and more at stake; or accept the change and tread a new path. The new path, he must have realized, was not a path of roses either. Here, in Pandanallur, he was treated with reverence and had the backing of the entire community; he could rely on the support of his comrades. But in Madras he would be in an alien place, an unknown company and more than anything else, among a sophisticated and elitist group whose interest in dance was still not a proven certainty. But when Pillai realized that changes in the art field were on the cards and no one could stop new entrants from honoured communities learning the art (Rukmini Devi was already learning from Mylapore Gauri Amma) he condescended to undertake a new and venturesome journey in his life. His journey to Madras was symbolically a journey of the art form towards its resuscitation and rejuvenation. It was also a journey of the art form from its rural confines to a wider metropolis. This was in 1934.

Several years later, in a humble recapitulation of his long journey, Meenakshisundaram reminisced about the two lives he lived⁴:

I am very old now and have been teaching the art for over fifty years. It was a remote ancestor of mine who developed this art, and as a direct descendent of that family I have tried my best to preserve and pass on the rich heritage they left us, their unworthy descendents...

I have taught generations of devadasis who in their time won name and fame for themselves. It was only very recently that educated girls from well-to-do families have taken to Bharata Natyam and one of the first to learn from me was Srimati Rukmini Devi of Adayar.

His journey was symptomatic of an important aspect that normally misses the attention of today's practitioners and also art lovers. Looking at the temporal and spatial revolutions that had set into art practice at that time, one would venture to surmise that those who were practising the art underwent a crisis of being and belonging! Pillai's life at Pandanallur – his very belonging to his native land, the hereditary profession he willingly practised and the environs which he endeared for sixty years – his very "being" was now in a transitory state of existence – he knew not whether his very "being" is at stake and he was trying to "relocate" himself and made to "belong" to new environs. The psychological and artistic transmutations that took place in his life made him realize that he should "implant" his beliefs and visions, aspirations and attempts to realize them into his new life as well. He only changed the type of disciples he had had and the work schedules, but not the actual work he had been doing! His vocation now is more concentrated and compressed compared to his leisurely avocation earlier. He seemed to have got accustomed to the pressure and urgency of working for more than 14 hours a day! But he adjusted himself to this new environment, rather smoothly. Thus he had successfully interwoven the two lives – the devadasi and the non-devadasi eras – and proved that artistic

excellence is a matter of gift acquired with hard work and intelligent application. Though he seemed to have lived two different lives, the two are so well integrated that one finds that all the earlier artistic tenets that he practised are followed in toto even in his later years – the same love for the art as a means to reach the divinity, the same concern for his pupils and, of course, the same strictness with which he wielded the *thattukzhi*. He believed in perfection and strove to attain it in his disciples.

Meenakshisundaram Pillai is also to be credited for his remarkable strength in upholding Bharatanatyam's dynamic inner structure as well as its outer presentational technique (a reason for its world-wide popularity) – and providing a strong technical and aesthetic base, inherited from his ancestors though. He was singularly responsible for not “diluting” the content and technique as it would happen in transitional times. His strong belief in retaining what he got from his masters and his ancestors and his equally strong belief in the ‘classicism’ of the art form (both the repertoire his ancestors had developed and the ‘margam’ which he himself so strictly followed) retained for Bharatanatyam its iconic stature as a great treasurehouse of proven resources and stratagems. His tenacity saved Bharatanatyam from falling into cheap and undesirable compromises as it happened in the case of several other traditional art forms during such transitions (and would have taken a long time to restore credibility).

From a rural profession to an urban art form:

Students of Indian art history – especially of performing arts – are usually sensitive to the problems confronted by new-generation-learners. I think it is worthwhile to look at the scenario from the point of view of the practising gurus! This is especially needed when an art form is under a

severe pressure to modify its existing spatial and temporal parameters. If we look at the changing scenario of dance practice since the ‘new renaissance’ – say, since the last eighty years – the first confrontation in art practice started with the ‘transcultural’ milieu (the entire nation was fighting for political freedom as well as to establish an identity of Indianness and the movement extended beyond any parochial considerations), thereby rubbing off the boundaries of linguistic and regional identity. Such a national identity demanded a free flow of a new crop of enthusiasts, deeply interested in knowing about their own roots and necessitated the creation of ‘translocational’ alternatives which, as a natural course of events, led to translingual adjustments. These quick and successional changes happening before his own eyes must have been a bewildering and traumatic experience to Meenakshisundaram Pillai as it was to several other great Gurus who pioneered the new Movements in dance. But this experience, in a way, strengthened his personality and his resolve to retain the purity of the form.

The ‘making’ of a humble man like Pillai into a celebrity, when once his teaching methodology, his practising modules and his ever-creative inputs were recognised and aspired for, was a natural outcome. Chandrabhaga Devi, U.S. Krishna Rao’s wife, who, along with her husband, was an ardent student of Pillai, spoke eulogistically about the role of Guru Pillai (and his like) in those transition days⁵:

During the dark days of the closing years of the last century and the first quarter of the present the dance art suffered callous neglect and disrepute and was under fire from anti-nautch social reformers. At that critical period Meenakshisundaram Pillai and his family were among the very few who kept to it tenaciously and preserved it in all its pristine purity. When the renaissance set in by the end of 1932, he was found to be the most valuable treasure - house for the dance art and his contribution to further status of the renaissance was substantial.

Meenakshisundaram Pillai's attitude towards these transitional maneuverings was positive and welcoming (after initial reservations) as his pronouncements from time to time signify. That unique quality of not only foreseeing things in an utterly unprejudiced mental framework, but also encouraging the practitioners and sharpening their skills in such a way that led them to be the future leaders of the art form. He served the cause of Bharatanatyam not simply by teaching the art to aspiring disciples, but serve as a *regisseur* - a French word connotating leadership, direction and a creative endeavour responsible for a unified artistic production. That he and his Brahmin disciple weathered several avalanches of sensibilities prove beyond doubt that artistic and professional integrity would be the only key for success, whether one belonged to the old school or the new, emerging school.

The way Meenakshisundaram Pillai synthesized the age-old practices with the "new creativity" itself lends to astonishing praiseworthiness (and I think one of the main attributes of a visionary). That this was to happen when he was past 60 speaks not so much about his attitude to life, as about his attitude to dance. This is testified by no less a person than Rukmini Devi herself⁶:

The greatness of Sri Meenakshisundaram Pillai was the fact that while he was a great exponent of the art according to the tradition of those days and a wonderful teacher who, though already aged, nevertheless was very open minded as to completely enter into the spirit of the new.

Coming from an orthodox family background in a village atmosphere, groomed in traditional attitudes to learning and teaching and practising the art where professional parameters are pre-fixed, Meenakshisundaram Pillai was hesitant to accept a Brahmin woman of a respectable family and at her 30th year wishing to learn an art so far prohibitive to anyone except to a single community's young girls. In the dichotomy between impulsive negation and a compulsive acceptance lies hidden a traditionalist who could see "beyond".

Early Trainees:

There seem to be two distinct phases in the life of Meenakshisundaram Pillai : the pre-1935 years when he resided at his native village Pandanallur and taught dance to devadasi girls and nattuvanars of his own community; and the post-1935 years when he mainly taught the non-devadasi men and women. Among the devadasi dancers he taught Tiruvallaputtur Kalyani Ammal, Thangachi Amma, Sabharanjithem and her cousin Nagaratnam, Jeevaratnam and Rajalaxmi, both of them Kalyani Ammal's daughters and Pandanallur Jayalaxmi are the most prominent. Among the nattuvanars, Chokkalingam Pillai, son-in-law of Meenakshisundaram, Kandappa Pillai, Tiruvalaputtur Swaminatha Pillai and several others received recognition.

After the crucial transitional stage of Bharatanatyam in the mid – 30's, Meenakshisundaram Pillai was active with the new breed of Bharatanatyam exponents whose special claims for reverence included their quest for the roots: to know what this great art means and how best we can do it; to probe into gems of performative excellence and now almost extinct ; to find new *jatis* and *teermanams* and above all, to improvise newer techniques

and novel materials. Names of his disciples in this new awakening almost run into 'who is who' in modern Bharatanatyam : Rukmini Devi Arundale, Ram Gopal, U.S. Krishna Rao couple, Nataraja Ramakrishna, Shanta Rao, Leela Ramanathan and many, many others⁷. Each one has a fascinating tale to tell about the wonderful attributes of head, heart and mind of their Guru. When he was convinced of Rukmin Devi's deep interest in and commitment to the art, he agreed to cross the 'Lakshmana-rekha' drawn by himself for himself and thus paved the way for a universal acceptance of the art form in general and the establishment of a national institute of Bharatanatyam, the Kalakshetra. After the initial days extending about one year, Meenakshisundaram Pillai returned to Pandanallur, sending his son, Chokkalingam Pillai to replace him. According to S. (Periya) Sarada, Meenakshisundaram Pillai returned quite often to Kalakshetra later and whenever he was there, he took classes along with Chokkalingam Pillai⁸.

The first exercise in reticence, consistent persuasion and ultimate acceptance having been successful, there was no turning back. Though he did not go to other places on teaching assignments, he was more than understanding when a student was confronted by genuine problems. We have several instances that testify his unrestrained benevolence. He went upto Tanjavur to teach U.S. Krishna Rao and Chandrabhaga Devi since they came with their small child. When the child was sent away to Bangalore, the boy became ill and the parents' presence was imminent. The couple started; there was a train accident and Meenakshisundaram Pillai was upset. He felt that "he had sent his students to certain death and sat petrified without eating or drinking anything for over 24 hours, till he received the telegram about the Raos' safety. Such was the concern of the master for his pupils."⁹

It was only after Meenakshisundaram Pillai had agreed to teach Rukmini Devi, Bharatanatyam, as we know it today, has come to stay and his style of

teaching had since been hailed as the most authentic. Chandrabhaga Devi had struck the right note when she agreed with E. Krishna Iyer on the importance gained by Meenakshisundaram Pillai. She reports Krishna Iyer saying, “Referring to Rukmini Devi, Meenakshisundaram Pillai felt that if his art was taught to a cultured lady, high-placed, prepossessing personality, it was likely to end mutilating it or dragging it down from its pristine purity and high level. But when he undertook the task, he became the cynosure of all eyes in the field of art and his name spread far and wide.”¹⁰

Meenakshisundaram Pillai synthesized carefully the two essential qualities of a Guru : adherence to traditional paramatres and the convenience of his disciples, both in his personal and professional obligations – the convenience of his pupils taking dominance over his own. In this respect he is the very symbol of the old time “guru-sishya sampradayam”, when the teacher benevolently directed and presided over the destinies of his sishyas. Thus vulnerability in showing extreme kindness and love to students in distress compensated by his strict adherence to both methods of teaching as well as the behavioural attitudes of the students. He was particularly insistent on what should be the dress to be used in practice and what to teach to men-disciples and women disciples. This vulnerability one would say – was amply justified due to the changing situations. That Meenakshisundaram Pillai adapted himself so well to the new teaching environment is by itself a testimony to his tenacious attitude towards his art. Meenakshisundaram Pillai was as strict and demanding as an old time stalwart; he wanted discipline, devotion and concentration from the student. Shaping them as artists, then, would be his duty. He never looked at teaching as a vocation; he thought it was an act of love – on the part of both the teachers and disciples towards the divinity.

Meenakshisundaram Pillai always felt protecting Bharatanatyam would

mean preserving its purity and creativity. It is interesting to note that most of his disciples had had their earlier tutelage from different gurus : Rukmini Devi from Mylapore Gauri Amma, Ram Gopal and Krishna Rao from Vidwan Kolar Puttappa, Nataraja Ramakrishna from Kalahasti Rajamma, Shanta from Kerala Kalamandalam and so on. But then why did they choose Pillai as their ultimate Guru. The answers are as diverse as the people ; but one thing all of them agree is on the authenticity of the form taught in the Pandanallur style. They, and in some cases, their earlier gurus thought as much. Rukmini Devi's evidence is clear enough. She says

When I saw the dance in the Music Academy I could see the perfection of technique, the pure classicism of the dance and decided that I must learn dance from Meenakshisundaram Pillai who was their (the dancers who performed at the Music Academy) guru....¹¹

Pillai's training programmes changed from disciple to disciple looking at their physique, their aptitude and their stamina. Ram Gopal, for example, remembered that 'Tatha' said that "he had not taught all the tandava portions of the dance to anyone so far. He taught me those, encouraging me to learn as much as I could,"¹² says he. He gives an illustration : He did devise special movements for me. For instance in the dance of Shiva – in the number 'Natanamadinar' – he made me jump higher than was usual in a normal recital. So was the case with Shanta Rao, who learnt 'thana varnams' from the old man. She also tells us an interesting anecdote about her learning these 'thana varnams',¹³ :

Pillai's creative genius found its fullest expression in the composition of varnams, the interpretative gesture-poems that are the most elaborate part of the Bharatanatyam repertoire. His stamp is nowhere more evident than in his thana varnams which require the most complete mastery of rhythmic technique at very rapid tempos. For many years bad luck was attached to thana carnams. Frightful predicaments were supposed to befall dancers who at-

tempted them, a most practical superstition, perhaps, in view of their complexity. It was Meenakshisundaram's daughter Chelaka who first told Shanta of her father's thana varnams, which even the legendary Jeevaratnam had not received from the master. Pillai believed that their mercilessly exacting rhythmic and interpretive structure demanded a quality of concentration and stamina that was rare and absolute. "Ask him to teach you," Chelaka urged. Shanta's thana varnam classes began at an hour chosen for auspicious advantage and with a composition in the raga Sankarabharanam. When Pillai later presented her in thana varnams, he announced that Shanta was the first dancer in fifty years to have essayed them.

Another area in which Pillai's teaching excelled was in the use of *adavu-jati-s*. As Krishna Iyer pointed out while responding to a recital of the Krishna Rao pair¹⁴ :

Lo!, to my great agreeable surprise I found the pair representing the art of the great veteran in all its fullness, beauty and grace. I could not but feel that for once in his life he has been fortunate in entrusting his art to the hands of a proper and intelligent type of disciples that it requires. The sight of a husband and wife team appearing as partners in a dance had peculiar charm, dignity and chasteness about it reminding us of its mythological and spiritual association...

The Pandanallur Style:

People often talk about the 'Pandanallur style' or 'Meenakshisundaram bani'. "It is only at Pandanallur that the traditions of the old Tanjore School are religiously preserved and practised,"¹⁵ asserts G. Venkatachalam, who was a knowledgeable connoisseur of dance in the first decades of the last century, because "the Grand Old Man of the art, Vidwan Meenakshisundaram Pillai, still lives there teaching and guiding his pupils with the utmost reverence for the old style as recreated by his ancestor, Vadivelu". Enumerating the features of this style, Venkatachalam explains¹⁶ :

Bharatanatyam is a virile art, like the Russian Ballet, and its beauty is in its strength ; for beauty is strength. In the gentle glidings of the neck, in the poised position of the dancer as she stands to render

the rechakas (not the erect “stand-to-attention” military attitude), in the outstretched hands at shoulder level, firm and even; in the correct bends of the body, in the sculptured design of the poses, in the free and forceful broad movements and in the perfect finish of the thirmanams by the full flourish of the arms and the complete curve of the body – all of which characterize the Pandanallur style – one really sees the vital beauty and the inner strength of Bharatanatyam.

Besides the selection and emphasis of the items chosen for individual dancers, Pillai’s style demonstrates both kinetic perfection as well as kinesthetic excellence¹⁷. In the Pandanallur style, equal emphasis is laid on *nritta* and *abhinaya*, and also a richness and variety of expression that one misses in others. That the *varnam* stands as a unique composition in the Bharatanatyam canon is partly because of this fine balance. When K. Chandrasekharan said ‘*laya*’ – rhythm – is specifically located at the foundation of Rukmini Devi’s programme, it is an inheritance she gratefully received from the Pandanallur master. The richness of the style probably arises from the fact that these two elements – *nritta* and *abhinaya* – are mutually complementary ; and, more than that, each one controls the excesses of the other. Gowri Ramanarayan quotes Chandrasekharan: “ I think she became convinced that only through discipline and control – through *laya* – could the regeneration of the art be effected, its excesses sheared.”¹⁸

Outwardly, there are two important things that he insisted upon : strict discipline being the core element in his teaching process and his amiable temperament when not teaching. He belonged to the old sampradaya which revels in its adage : "Spare the rod, spoil the child." We have stories of his strictness his disciples have narrated, along with those that replete with his large-heartedness and his concern for them. “He was extremely strict during

lesson-time, a virtual tyrant,”¹⁹ “If he was angry at the insufficient performance of his pupils at any time, he would not hesitate to throw his *thattukzhi* or stick at their feet,” etc²⁰. He would use the same principle when disturbed while teaching. However, disciples, one after the other, sing in praise of his benevolence, concern, kind-hearted treatment and, above all, his paternal attitude towards all, especially those in difficulties.

Shanta has a vivid tale to tell about his general supervisory behaviour²¹ :

He (Pillai) was a very strict disciplinarian and throughout the long hours of lessons he would not permit me to rest or stand still even for a second. The only excuse he would tolerate was thirst – he would just permit a few seconds for me to rush to the kitchen and gulp some water. Even here he seemed to know the exact amount of time one should take for a drink of water. I dared not exceed the limit. If I did, he would call out to me to make haste.

This attitude of ‘chasing the student into a classroom’ might be construed as authoritarian these days, but Pillai's concern seemed to be that the training imparted should deliver the results needed for retaining the 'purity' of the form and time was an important factor in the newly-emerging group of disciples' schedule, especially when they came from outside. Secondly, he was constantly aware that his new bunch of disciples could not spend years and years of their prime time in learning as his earlier disciples were accustomed to but he should teach them ‘all’ he learnt, within the short time given to him. The day-long time schedules also indicate how he was re-modelling his teaching methods to suit the changing needs!

He must also have changed the schedules of his teaching. Though no evidence is available as to his way of teaching during the earlier phase, (but based on the evidences of the teaching schedules as practised in the 'gurukula' system) one could surmise it was more relaxed and was dependent on the teacher's mood and his leisure. Time was divided between teaching and

performance. But now the entire training is crammed into a set number of months, according to the convenience of the student, not according to the convenience of the teacher as before.

There are other, equally important, facts of Pillai's teaching methodology. One such was his individual attention to each student. As Nataraja Ramakrishna mentioned, he devoted his entire time and attention to a single student at a time, for that would perforce, get his wholesome attention²². This one-to-one attention had its impact on the over-all supervision of the student's artistic development. Shanta Rao's detailed account of Meenakshisundaram Pillai's daily schedule along with his routine household chores as well as his time modules indicate how methodical Pillai was as a teacher. Her account, as narrated to her biographer, runs thus:²³

My master was a very early riser and he would always expect me to be up and dressed before him and to be ready for my lessons. As soon as he had left his bed, he would call out to me, "Are you ready?" and all through the years I was with him I never made him wait for me, even for a minute. The morning lessons would begin about five-thirty and would last until eight when we would stop for breakfast. But my master, who was very religious, would not begin his breakfast until he had finished his puja. This would last at least half an hour, and I would have to wait. In the early years of my studies, he ate well but later ill-health robbed him of his appetite and he would eat little. After breakfast the lessons continued until the afternoon post was delivered, and that would be the signal that we could both retire for our baths. . . .

After his bath he would begin his lunch, but only after praying again for some time. On certain days of the Hindu calendar his puja would take as long as an hour or two. And all this time I had to wait with my hunger growing as neither of us would ever lunch alone. Yet Meenakshisundaram was always very considerate – he would insist that I eat a lot of whatever was served to keep up my strength, and he was always worried about my health. After

lunch he would ask me to rest for half an hour and be ready for lessons again at three o'clock. They would continue until six with just a five minute break for a glass of milk. At seven o'clock our *hasta* classes would start, and these would be practised while sitting. After an hour and a half of lessons we had a very light dinner and the master would lie down to rest and ask me to sit down beside him. The relationship of master and pupil was put aside and he would be just a weary old man reminiscing of his past I used to listen spellbound and drink in every word as he spoke of dancers he had taught and their lives.

Similar time-schedules Pillai followed were mentioned by other dancers as well. The training was divided into four sessions, each session specializing in a particular aspect²⁴. Besides these preferences in dance training, many of which he inherited from his ancestors, Meenakshisundaram Pillai continued them imprinting his own methodology so that each student's convenience is also taken into consideration. It almost amounts to person-specific training programme within the general parametres of the entire range of Bharatanatyam repertoire.

The rich legacy of Bharatanatyam's repertoire and the "margam" the dancers have been following are largely the creation of the Tanjore Quartet, which were carefully preserved, honoured and furthered by the tradition-bound methods adopted by Pillai. *Sabdams, padams, javalis, varnams* and *padavarnams* – whatever he had learnt from his two Gurus, he had retained them and passed them on to his disciples. The composition of each one of these has a graph and grammar of its own. Pillai insisted that the basic performative structure is to be understood and all other examples of this genre would follow almost the same formula. What seems to be a special mark of creativity exemplified by Pillai was the innovations he had added in the form of *jatis* – many of them appended as impromptu improvisations as and when he was teaching. We have the authority of the Krishna Rao

couple to understand how his '*jati*' formulations are creative additions to the entire performance. Incorporating *jatis* is always a rhythmic exercise which adds beauty and finish, not merely to the *charanam* or the song, but to the whole aesthetic experience which is exemplified by the textual meaning and the bearing of its rhythmic interpretation. The role of *jatis* and *teermanams* in the best of the compositions is multi-layered : first of all, it is an extension and continuation of the mood of the song; secondly, it is a rhythm whose sub-text is the song and thus remains a pleasing alternative to the text ; as an extension of the song's mood, it presents the 'body's responses to the song's meaning; it, in totality, is the fulsome interpretation of the text through 'angika' exemplification, a great innovation made by our gurus to offer a visual feast with footwork alone as, in some other places in miming, abhinaya without any footwork represents a silent "mental rhythm" through the movement of the hands, eyes, lips and other facial *upangas*, here is physical rhythm sans any text, thus providing a meaningful alternative. If the abhinaya part offers 'sabda laya' the concluding adavu-*jatis* and *teermanams* offer 'laya sabda', thus suggesting the balanced architecture of an aural-visual medium such as dance. This one could call the "architectonics of a choreographic composition,"²⁵ which is Pillai's most creative contribution to the performative technique of Bharatanatyam.

The architectonics of a choreographic composition :

The Pandanallur school as practised and propagated by Pillai stands for authenticity in style and visual form, uncompromisingly classical in tone, mood and content, the style furnishing a direct and vital link with the precepts laid down in *Natyasastra*.

It is often said that among the several features that the Pandanallur style is famous for, *angasuddhi*²⁶ is the most dominant and, of course, most difficult. Pillai was the first who had pronouncedly emphasized this, though it has been an essential part of dance in general and Bharatanatyam in particular. *Angasuddhi* means 'grace', 'graceful body' and consequen-

tially graceful movements. The word extends to mean ‘any kinetic propriety’ of a performer when explicating a mood or a meaning.

Along with *angasuddhi* goes *azuttham*, firmness and holding the shoulders back with the spine straight. “When he (Pillai) demonstrated a shoulder movement or a posture of the body, the learners were astonished to see the power, tension, dignity and beauty that were brought out.”²⁷

When the body is in command, Pillai would then go into rhythmic intricacies. As the Raos explained²⁸ :

In this style there is a definite emphasis on technique.

By technique we mean the proper *araimandi*, proper footwork, correct angles and position of limbs, straight back and held-back shoulders, coupled with intelligent use of *adavu-s*, *mudra-s*, etc. Just as a woman cannot be considered beautiful if she does not have a straight spine, good bone structure and correct dimensions, a dancer cannot produce an aesthetic performance unless she has perfect grasp of technique. One’s creativity and individuality can come into play only after the fundamental techniques have been mastered.

The technique he had adhered to so strictly was the one his ancestors had relegated to him as their benedictory gift and he retained it with all the miserliness of a devotee. As a critic pointed out, “he is a strict traditionalist and believes in discipline and hard work. He will not let any new fangled idea or fashion affect his art.”²⁹ He himself was of the firmest view that, as a direct descendant of the family which taught dance for more than fifty years, he had tried his best to preserve and pass on the rich heritage they left him.

Meenakshisundaram was adept in the entire repertoire of the Tanjore quartet. Inspired by Pillai’s teaching, Mrinalini Sarabhai got all the songs that were systematized by the quartet and published with the help of K.P. Sivanandham and Kittappa Pillai and paid a glowing tribute to her Guru and

his family “who had preserved and propagated Bharatanatyam,” but noted with humility, “for me, personally, it was a dedication to my guru.”³⁰

Especially exemplary were the several *pada varanams* and *tana varnams*. In the entire repertoire of Bharatanatyam, *varnam* is considered to be the highpoint of a dancer’s technical accomplishment and dramatic projection. *Varnams* are the ultimate test of “a performer’s intellectual perception, creativeness, technical skill and sheer physical stamina,” for the presentation of any single *varnam* would take not less than an hour. Between the *pada* and *tana varanams*, the latter are the most neglected because they are the most complex ones. Combining both the foot work and the varying stances, *tana varnams*, with their lightning movements and dazzling combinations of rhythms are exceptionally evocative both for the ear and the eye!

Pillai choreographed several other *javalis*, *padams* and *varnams*, besides composing Tyagaraja’s *pancharatna krutis* to dance. Among the several songs he choreographed in Telugu mention must be made of those he had composed on the deity of his village temple, Shiva as Lord of the Beasts. Pillai also recomposed the music for the traditional *Sarabhendu Bhoopala Kuravanchi* which he did for Rukmini Devi. S. Sarada narrates how Pillai wanted to sideline it, but was caught unawares and had to do it. His choreographies of *Jatiswarams*, especially the *raga malika* in *Surati* won the laurels of one and all. At the behest of Rukmini Devi, he also choreographed a Sanskrit sloka from *Krishna karnamritham*. Though Rukmini Devi praised Pillai’s knowledge of Sanskrit and his expertise in composing songs for dance, it was suggested that she wanted Pillai to choreograph the piece “to test his knowledge of Sanskrit.”³¹

Meenakshisundaram’s noble qualities of heart and mind remain alive even today, thanks to the standards maintained by him in teaching and by many of the first-ranking disciples he taught. His choreographed compositions are too many to be listed out. He added a new verve in framing the

teermanams and formulating the *jatis* with appropriate *adavus* ; he devised new dance patterns to suit individual dancers; he taught them the more important stage techniques of how to use the body's postures to their advantage with arrestingly picturesque, statuesque formulations contrasting them with fast-moving *jatis* and mood-creating *mudras*. He is also known for his compositions, especially his *padavarnams* in Vachaspati and Todi ragas and his Telugu compositions in Bhairavi and Todi and the *ragamalika kriti* on Venugambika Ambal in the Pasupatiswaraswami temple at Pandanallur.

Pillai's innovative use of the *jatis* and *teermanams* received the approbation of one and all. S. (Peria) Sarada of the Kalakshetra corroborated with these views of Pillai's excelling potentialities in *jatis* and *teermanams*³² : "Meenakshisundaram Pillai's manner of reciting the *theermanams*, the drum syllables," writes Sarada, "was unsurpassed. He taught some of us this beautiful way of reciting *theermanams*. Amongst the Nattuvanars, he was unique and possessed a working knowledge of Sanskrit. He was a teacher of great talent and his dance compositions are always recognisable because of their special harmonious quality."

But Pillai's greatest contribution seems to be the creative direction he provided in making his new band of disciples not only excellent performers but innovative choreographers. 'Choreography' is a word added to Indian dance terminology after Pillai's times. In Pillai's days teaching and learning dance involved several chores – singing, dancing and doing *nattuvangam* – the later, as told by learned people, involved playing on *mridangam* also. Today, as a great relief to the dancers (and, of course, the audience) singing is separated and conducting the dance is retained with *nattuvangam*. Like the modern advanced medical science, 'dance science' (pardon my audacity!) might lead some dancers to specialize in hand gestures, some others in *chari-s* and a very small number might choose *abhinaya* as a specialization.

But in Pillai's days, 'totality' was the key word. He insisted on the dancers learning Telugu and Tamil; they must also learn singing. Pillai could soon see the difference between his earlier devadasi disciples and the new crop of intelligent, creative and self-willed students, the difference clearly lying in the latter's capacity to capture the intricacies taught by the guru and also take it further to new creative heights, though he could see that the devadasi disciples came with a fine singing voice and a natural talent for miming. Pillai's ways of alerting his disciples towards new possibilities in choreographing new compositions places him high above all his contemporary teachers. One can call this 'creative choreography'. The instances mentioned by three of his best students would explain the ways in which he trained them in this creativity.

These illustrations signify the newly attained confidence of the guru in training his disciples not only in the "items" of dance but in equipping them with the necessary mental and psychological, imaginative and technical inputs needed by them for choreographing a piece by themselves. It looks like a training programme as well as a teacher's training programme!

Teaching the external techniques seems to be the most fundamental. Pillai taught them how to use their body, keep it in position, but also use it flexibly in *adavu jatis* and the use of the footwork in tune with the mood of the set piece and, of course, in the now well-acknowledged *teermanams*! But equally important in the externalities is the use of the stage space. As U.S. Krishana Rao stresses, it is only in the Pandanallur style that a student is taught to use the entire stage and use the body positions in a meaningful and striking way.³³

The second aspect is with regard to the carefully structured teaching methodology that Pillai alone, among his contemporaries, seemed to have followed. In their vivid descriptions of the daily routine of Pillai's teaching, everyone of the disciples, right from Rukmini Devi to his grandson-disciple

Gopalakrishnan talked about how each of the four sessions of the day are devoted, the sessions starting at 5.30 A.M. and ending usually at 7 P.M., but many times going into late nights³⁴ :

Shanta Rao has this to say on the schedules of training before a disciple takes up on choreographing independently³⁵ :

He (Pillai) sat in a corner of the room, beating the *thatakalli* and sometimes his face would express joy, sorrow or love according to the mood of the song. Or he might make the slightest gesture of the body or hands, giving one just a hint. It used to surprise me how much I could learn without following any actual movements demonstrated by the teacher. First I was made to master the rudimentary movements, and then the more complex movements and gestures. At the same time I had to learn to use my face, eyes and lips to express the emotions of the song and all its subtle nuances. Only after I had mastered each component would my master permit me to interpret a song or its sentiment.

His day began with the explication of the chosen song, vivisectioning the line into smaller units, with a word to word meaning of the line, repeating the line several (hundreds of) times, stressing on the proper intonation of the words. Then the entire song is sung bringing out its meaning clearly. The second session was devoted to the *angika* aspects. If a candidate is already trained, he would take up the *angikam* of the song now being taught. Otherwise, he would teach the *adavus* from the beginning and then only start composing the movements for a song. In the afternoon he would train them on the *adavus* and in the evening till late in the night on the *abhinaya* aspects of the lines, thus making a graded progress on the structure, meaning and subtext of a composition. This enables a wholesome understanding of the song by the disciple. He would repeat the same process for any number of days until he was sure that the disciple had mastered the song its text and texture, its context and subtext as well - along with the intricacies in *abhinaya*.

Then follow the embellishments – the *adavu jatis* and *teermanams*; the subtle *mudras* and glances and the use of the finer *upangas*.

This method of explication with word specific, line-specific and song-specific attention on one side and, on the other, training in the *vacika*, *angika* and *sattvika* aspects is the key to the Pandanallur style, which shows a graded and layered methodology, starting from mere word meanings, hand gestures and *adavus* to more intricate movements and postures and colouring it later with attributes of pace, beauty, balance and stage – effectiveness and finally with the *sattvika* expressions.. This is a method that elevates the song interpretation from the mere technical externalities to the intrinsic soul of the song. When once the choreography of a sample item in a particular genre (say, a *padam*, a *javali* or *varnam*) was given, Pillai would explain to his disciples that the same principles of graphing would apply to all songs that could come under the same category. In fact, when Krishna Rao asked for teaching them after he taught them the *varnam in Khamas*, *varnam* Pillai is said to have retorted : “Where is the need for another *varnam*? If you know one, the others are similar. You can use your imagination and set the other *varnams* yourself.”³⁶ With a more imaginative disciple, he would teach the external ramifications of the song and ask them to fill in the intricate *sancharis*. A case in point is the method he practised with Rukmini Devi herself.

S. Sarada mentions a very exhilarating incident which throws light both on the teacher’s willingness to allow a deserving student to experiment and the student’s equally imaginative calibre to come to the expectations of the teacher³⁷ :

When Rukmini Devi was learning the Ragamalika *varnam*, I was attending that class. Meenakshisudaram Pillai taught the straight gesture sequences for the word for word meaning. Then he asked her to show a *sancharibhava* for four *avarthanams* on her own, for

the well-known incident of the lifting of Mount Kailasa by Ravana, and his subjugations and release by Lord Shiva. She asked how she should begin. He said, “start with the uplifted *suchi* denoting long, long ago.” He sang the line four times. She depicted the story in beautiful gesture form. When she had finished the story, a last bit of *tala* had to be completed. Meenakshisundaram Pillai said, “Fill that with a *sambuddhi*.” A beautiful *sanchari* sequence had taken shape before our eyes. He was very pleased but did not express it in words. He merely said, “Keep this *sanchari bhava* for this line.” He, being an eminent composer of dances, was able to appreciate the creative ability of Rukmini Devi.

This is the crux of the Pandanallur style or more conveniently called the Meenakshisundaram style. "In this style, a step was never repeated in the song. Further, the steps would be taught according to the *swaram* of the song. The connecting or end steps would be fitted into the whole structure artistically. It was not easy to do so except to an imaginative mastermind like Tatha's. It was also observed that Tatha would teach a line here and a step there and arrange them into a baffling whole"³⁸. The whole aesthetic structure of a composition must have already been formulated in his mind. And for an artist, deeply involved in the style, the arrangement was never haphazard. It was orderly, though intricate ; beautiful though hard to learn ; aesthetically enjoyable with no perceptive technical skill on which great stress was laid by the students. Pillai's creative excellence goes beyond all this ; a veritable challenge to a guru ; a dream come true to an aspiring disciple and teasingly orderly and beautiful to the spectator.

He stands as a Herculean figure in the modern history of Bharatanatyam, not easily imitable, let alone anyone surpassing him.

Notes:

1. *Shraddanjali*, Rukmini Devi Birth Centenary Publication, Edited by Shakuntala Ramani, Chennai, Kalakshetra Foundation, p.56.
2. Rukmini Devi “Rukmini on herself”, *Rukmini Devi Birth Centenary Volume*, Chennai, Kalakshetra Foundation, n.d., p.38.
3. The most important one to influence Meenakshisundaram Pillai's later acceptance is said to be E. Krishna Iyer and his son-in-law, Ponnai Pillai, See Rukmini Devi, op.cit., p.38.

4. Meenakshisundaram Pillai, "Foreword", G. Venkatachalam, *Shrimati Shanta and Her Art*, Bangalore, Hosali Press, pp.95-97.
5. Chandrabhaga Devi, *Shrungara*, Ed. H.N. Suresh, *A compilation of articles on life and works of Prof. U.S. Krishna Rao and Smt. U.K. Chandrabhagadevi*, Maha Maya Golden Jubilee Celebrations, Bangalore, 1992, p.23.
6. *Shraddhanjali*, 56. p.47-48.
7. M. Nagabhushana Sarma, "Some distinguished disciples of Guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai," *Nartanam*, X, ii (April-June 2010), pp.43-53.
8. S. Sarada, *Kalakshetra-Rukmini Devi*, Madras, Kala Mandir Trust, 1985, p.47.
9. *Shrungara*, op.cit., p.
10. *Shrungara*, p.22.
11. "Rukmini on Herself," p.37.
12. Ram Gopal, "Interview with Ram Gopal" by Sunil Kothari, *Nartanam*, III, 4 (Oct-Dec., 2003), p.15.
13. Ashoke Chatterjee, *Dances of the Golden Hall*, New Delhi: Indian Council for cultural Relations; 1979.
14. As quoted by GCS & PCJ, *Sruti*, 43 (April 1988), p.20-21.
15. G. Venkatachalam "Bharatanatyam," *Dance in India*, Bombay : Nalanda Publications, n.d., p.94.
16. I bid., pp.95-96.
17. I use these two terms in a more contemporized usage where 'kinetic' stands for any body movement that interprets and strengthens the architectural parametres as required by a text ; and kinesthetics as a movement of any part of the body (especially the facial expressions) which signifies, explores, vivifies and also provides the sub-textual interpretations. They, together, provide the basic strategies needed for a performance.
18. Quoted in Guru Ramnarayan, "Rukmini Devi: Dancer and Reformer, A Profile," Part 2, *Sruti* 9 (July), p.47.
19. *Dances of the Golden Hall*, p.47.
20. Ibid., p.41.
21. Ibid., pp.47-48.
22. Nataraja Ramakrishna, "A Great Guru," *Nartanam*, X, 2 (April-June 2010), P.33.
23. *Dances of the Golden Hall*, p.47.
24. See Rukmini Devi, "Rukmini on Herself," p.38, U.S. Krishna Rao and Chandrabhaga Devi, *Shrungara*, pp.23-24.
25. "Architectonics," a word that denotes several things in software engineering" may mean the sum total of designing, planning, suggesting a systematic progression pertaining to the arrangement of knowledge.
26. *Shrungara*, p.106.
27. Ibid., pp.106-107.
28. Ibid.
29. His own comments on this aspect will bear testimony: "Departure from tradition, and inclusion of totally unsuitable pieces in the name of innovation only lowers the standard of this art."

- Meenakshisundaram Pillai, "Bharatanatyam," (Translated from a lecture given by Pillai in Tamil), *Rukmini Devi Centenary Volume*, p.126.
30. Mrinalini Sarabhai, "Foreword," *Tanjore Quartet Compositions*, (ed.) K.P. Sivanandham, (4th ed.) 2002, p.xii.
 31. Statement made by Sivanandham, grandson of Pillai, as quoted in Gauri Ramanarayan, "A Quest for Beauty", *Kalakshetra Quarterly*, Vol.VIII, Nov.3-4, p.86.
 32. *Ibid.*, p.49.
 33. Krishna Rao, *Shrungara*, p.107
 34. M. Gopalakrishnan, "Reminiscences," *Nartanam*, X, 2 (April-June 2010), p.41.
 35. *Dances of the Golden Hall*, p.47.
 36. Krishna Rao, *Shrungara*, p.106.
 37. *Rukmini Devi – Kalakshetra*, p.47.
 38. M. Gopalakrishnan, "Guru Meenakshisundaram Pillai: Some Reminiscences," *Nartanam*, X, 2 (April-June 2010), p.42.