

Karanas

(Address at the Book Release of *Karanas* - Dr. Padma Subramaniam at Narada Gana Sabha Chennai on 01/07/2003)

The Versatile knowledge of Kanchi Paramacharya His Holiness Sri Sri Chandrasekarendra Saraswati Swamigal was unique and unparalleled. Once we went to the Mahaswami to get the approval of the Utsava Vighraha of Swaminatha Swami Temple (*Malai Mandir*) in Delhi. The Mahaswami had cataract in the eyes at that time. He received the idol and went on passing hand over the entire idol for a few minutes.

We got nervous whether the Mahaswami would not approve the idol. Finally, Mahaswami asked if the *stapadi* was with me and if so to call him. Mahabalipuram Ganapati Stapadi who cast the idol was called. The Mahaswami asked the Stapadi what *mudra* he had set. The Stapadi replied *Yoga Mudra*. The Mahaswami said it looked like *Kataka Mudra* and asked him to examine again. To cut the story short, it was found the Mahaswami was right and the *mudra* was rectified. I was stupefied. Where and when did the Mahaswami study so minutely the *Mudras* of natya sastra?

The Mahaswami had always high regard for the expertise of M S Subbulakshmi's Music and wrote the song "*Maitreen Bhajata*" for her performance in the United Nations. It received a thunderous oration from the members of the World Assembly. The Mahaswami had high regard for the profound knowledge of the theory and practice of Dr. Padma Subramaniam and set for her the pioneering task of collecting all the 108 *Karanas* (dance forms) and sculpt them and install them in the Nataraja temple at Satara in Maharashtra. He told Padma the temples in which some of these *Karanas* had been carved in. The Mahaswami also told her that she should visit Indonesia and study the *Karanas* in the ancient temples there. When later Padma went to Indonesia and visited the ancient Hindu City *Prambanan* destroyed by earthquake later in the 15th Century, she saw there panels of 53 *Karanas* out of 108.

Natya Sastra says

Hasta Padha Samayogo
Nrutasya Karanam Baveth
Atma Kaya Sama yoga
Nrutasya Karanam Baveth

Karana refers to frozen image of a total posture of dance involving several parts of the body like hands, legs and the torso. *Karana* reflects the pinnacle of the developments of dance technique. Natyasastra gives details of 108 *Karanas*. According to mythology Siva is said to have danced the 108 *Karanas* and therefore Siva was the author of the movements. I can do no better than quote Dr. Padma's inimitable summing up of the conception of the *Karana*.

"The conception of *Karana* is such that it is capable of endowing both subjective and objective satisfaction on physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual planes. To the performer, it is a physical exercise, keeping every limb of the body under control to procure good health. To the spectator, the beauty of the body line caused by the actions is a feast for eyes. The *Karanas* have their own psychological side too. The *Karanas* are capable of expressing idea of full sentences.". Hence *Karanas* had an important role in the science of dancing.

Dr. Padma's laborious studies and research on Natya Sastra and the correlated sculptures portraying *Karanas* in the Brihadeeswara temple, Thanjavur, Sarangapaniswami Temple at Kumbakonam, Nataraja Temple at Chidambaram and Arunachala Temple at Thiruvannamalai are beautifully brought out in the three volumes.

Karanas are movements, which were units of dance in the Bharata tradition all over India and all over Asia. This technique had faded away from North India from the 12th Century and in South India from the 14th Century as a result of religious and political disturbances. After the Vijayanagara Empire was established, Swami *Vidyaranya* tried to revive many facets of Hindu culture. But there are inscriptional evidence which prove that many of the older forms were forgotten and these traditions had to be revived with great difficulty. Dr. Padma Subrahmanyam has been ordained to revive the common “Marga” codes as found in Bharata-Muni’s *Natya Sastra*. This has been achieved not only at the theoretical level but it has been reconstructed for actual practice.

Pujyasri Mahaswami had graciously commanded Dr. Padma to design a new set of 108 *Karana* sculptures (having twin figures of Siva and Parvati) to be included in the Satara shrine. It is noteworthy that nowhere else such twin figures of our universal parents are seen portrayed as performing the *Karanas*. She was not allowed to copy the existing sculptures.

Since it was her theory that each dance sculpture is a still photograph of a moving dancer, the Mahaswami wanted her to freeze those parts of the movements which are not already captured in stone earlier. Padma took 1 ½ years to design them and Sri Muthiah Stapadi took over a decade to complete this sculpture series in black granite.

The three precious volumes on *Karanas* authored by Dr. Padma Subramaniam contain a wealth of knowledge and information not produced earlier. Dr. Padma deserves the gratitude of the nation as well as people of Asia where in Indian sculpture and culture had spread in the past.