

Rukmani Devi Arundale

(Welcome Address as Chairman, Kalakshetra Foundation at the Inauguration of Centenary Celebration of Smt. Rukmini Devi at Kamani Auditorium New Delhi on 29.02.2004)

It is a moot point in our National history whether the renaissance that over took the country in the early years of the 20th century kindled the freedom movement or whether the freedom movement kindled the revival of the pride in the ancient art and culture of India. Without wasting time on the egg and hen syndrome, I would say that they synchronized and led to a resurgent India. Several eminent people began to take pride in our arts and crafts and tried to revive them. Rukmini Devi Arundale was one such star in the national firmament.

Born on 29th February 1904 in an orthodox Brahmin family in Tamilnadu, Smt. Rukmini Devi naturally acquired good knowledge of Sanskrit. Her father, Shri. Nilakanta Sastri, an engineer by profession was attracted to Theosophy and became an ardent follower of Dr. Annie Besant. Rukmini Devi was a social rebel. She married in 1920 at the age of 17, a Britisher Dr. G S Arundale a great educationist and co-worker with Dr. Annie Besant. The marriage was met with wild criticism bordering on abuse, but it had no effect on Rukmini Devi. On the other hand, the marriage gave her an opportunity to bring out the vast talents she possessed.

She became the President of the Young Theosophists of India and with her pleasing presence and fluent English, she proved to be a great success. Later, she became President of the Young Theosophists of the World. She travelled widely all around the globe with Dr. GS Arundale who had become the International President of the Theosophical Society.

Even as a young girl Rukmini Devi made a mark as a singer. In fact, she wanted to be a musician at first. However, when she went to Australia in 1926 saw the world-renowned Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova doing a ballet her interest in dance was kindled. She then learnt ballet from another renowned dancer Cleo Nordi. From time immemorial India has had several classical dances. The *Natya Sastra* has been written by Saint Bharata millennia ago. So much importance had been attached to *Natya Sastra* that it is called the fifth Veda.

The Natya, which was the pride of ancient India, fell into disrepute on account of the lack of patronage from the princes and temples during the colonial days. It became the accomplishment of *Devadasis* – the courtesans. Their movements and poses were uncouth. But Rukmini Devi was deeply impressed with the rhythm, beauty and meaning of these dances. At age of 28, she studied *Natya Sastra* and learnt Bharatanatyam from a famous school of dance in Tamil Nadu and mastered the art. The orthodox opinion was aghast, critical and abusive. It thought that an elite person like Rukmini Devi had debased herself by doing a *Sadir* (the contemptible name for natya). Rukmini Devi had always the courage of conviction and she did give a public performance of Bharatanatyam in Chennai. She made several innovations she redesigned the costumes, copied the jewellery worn in the paintings and sculptures of ancient times. With her statuesque face and form, impeccable rhythm and *abhinaya* (gestures) she held the audience spell-bound and wound-up her performance to thunderous applause of the entire house. Rukmini Devi made one more innovation. While keeping in place elegantly *Sringara* (Romance) she substituted it by *Bhakti* (devotion to God) and thus won the hearts of the elite. She started the Kalakshetra in 1936 and made it the most authentic school of Bharatanatyam. She choreographed 25 Dance-Dramas for the Kalakshetra. Students from all over India and abroad like Russia, Japan, South East Asia and the Americas had studied and are still studying in the Kalakshetra complying with the severe discipline of being vegetarians.

She built an excellent campus in a 100 acre site on the Sea front in South Chennai. Some years after, the demise of the Patron Saint of Art, the Kalakshetra became “Kalakshetra foundation”, an institution of National Importance, by an Act of Parliament.

Rukmini Devi had an abundant sense of aesthetics. She revived old patterns of sarees and wove special designs in the looms she had set up in Kalakshetra. These were known as *Adayar Sarees* and were much sought after. Even now, the Kalakshetra is producing a variety of patterns and giving them to the Handloom industry.

Long before the world woke up to the toxic effect of chemical dyes, India had experimented with natural dyes from plants. Rukmini Devi started this experiment in the Kalakshetra with several plants and mixing a number of them to produce attractive and fast colours. An excellent treatise titled. “The Art and Craft of Natural Dyes” prepared by Smt. Shakuntala Ramani, who is in-charge of the Craft education and research centre of Kalakshetra foundation will be released later in this function.

Dr. Annie Besant had invited Maria Montessori, the founder of a new system of education for children, to the Theosophical Society to run the schools in her method now known as *Montessori System*. Rukmini Devi introduced the system in the schools she ran in Kalakshetra for poor fisherman’s children, who were living around Kalakshetra campus. She was one of the pioneers to encourage and introduce the Montessori system in the schools.

Above all, Rukmini Devi was a humanist; she showered kindness and compassion on all beings, Bird, Beast and Man through out of her life. She crusaded for *prevention of cruelty to animals*. As a Private member of the Rajya Sabha, she introduced a Bill for Prevention of cruelty to animals and carried it through successfully in both the Houses. Her speech introducing the Bill in the Rajya Sabha in 1954 was one of the best pieces of parliamentary eloquence. It was indeed the first enactment of a private member Bill in the annals of our Republic.

She headed the World Vegetarian Congress for several years and was the moving spirit behind the Indian section of that organization. She was bestowed the “*Prani Mitra*” Award for her life- long devotion to the cause of kindness to animals.

Such was her devotion to Art and Crafts that when Prime Minister Morarji Desai invited her to be the President of India, she declined saying her interest was in our ancient art and culture. I am not aware of any other such instance in our annals.

Rukmini Devi’s physical form had faded but the fragrance of her memory will last as long as mountains Stand and Rivers flow in the sacred land of ours.