

With rings on her fingers and bells on her ankles, Bharata Natyam dancer Srekala Bharat has been tapping her feet to music wherever she goes. Her inimitable style, nimble footwork and exquisite abhinaya have made a mark in the hearts of many dance connoisseurs both within the country and across the shores in 25 countries.

A disciple of renowned guru K J Sarasa, Srekala Bharath is also known for her ingenuity as a choreographer. Her thematic presentations ranging from traditional classics to modern day concepts have received wide acclaim, which include the Tamil Nadu state award Kalaimamani, and the Bharata Rathnam from the Government of Sri Lanka.

Through her institution, “Thejas”, Srekala Bharath has been moulding other young dancers into delightful artistes. Her lecture demonstrations are one of its kind. She has brought out educational CDs containing the basics of Bharatanatyam along with a traditional margam and presentation of short items.

When the eBalak team visited her house in Chennai for a tete-e-tete, we were pleasantly greeted with positive vibes emanating from every corner of the house. Beautiful pictures, curios, brass lamps and idols jostled for space on every flat surface, reflecting the inner beauty of a versatile dancer called Srekala Bharath.

And here is what followed:

Are you a first generation dancer?

Yes, in my family, I am a first generation dancer to earn a name for myself. Of course, my mother, Indira Krishnamachari, was a very good singer and led group bhajans in temples, and my mother-in-law, Jaya Krishnan, was a veteran Carnatic musician.

Following the trend in every family, my parents wanted me to learn an art, and I landed in a dancing school run by my guru, K. J. Sarasa, just two streets away from our house.

What roles have your guru and family played in your triumph?

I was very fortunate to have a wonderful guru like K. J. Sarasa, and a supportive family that included my parents, in-laws, husband and son. My guru was hard working, strict and humorous, all at one go. She tapped my talent to the last drop.

‘Gu’ means ‘darkness’ and ‘ru’ translates to ‘one who brings you out.’ So a guru is one who brings you out of darkness. As students, we spend half the time with our teachers; they play an important role in moulding us, and we in turn must demonstrate Guru Bhakti, particularly while learning a performing art.

I worked with my guru for 30 years, from 1966 to 1999, and started my own school, “Thejas”, only when she suggested it. She graced my school on the opening day and blessed all my students. I consider that an honour. As K. J. Sarasa’s student, I feel proud to have taken Bharata Natyam to so many countries. My aim is to be a good teacher like her.

What is your take on children learning dance?

I appreciate children who take to classical dance because they are doing it despite academic pressure, and hence are bound to excel. I have been conducting the Thejas Bala Natyotsav every year, featuring dancers aged 8 to 11 years from other dance schools. And I must say there is immense talent in youngsters today.

Does learning dance help in academics?

Certainly! It teaches a lot of discipline and sharpens the memory. You have to correlate with the singer, musicians, nattuvangam artiste, your footwork, abhinaya, etc. You have to remember what you have learnt and reproduce. You have to transform yourself into the character you portray.

What is your opinion about fusion dance? Does it pose a challenge to traditional Bharata Natyam?

Why not fusion dance? There is no doubt that the audience welcomes a change. Although Ramayana and Mahabharata are popular in foreign countries, the spectators will not be able appreciate if they are presented in their pure form.

In France, you find more French people in the audience, and so I make it a point to give the gist of the dance in French. Chandra Bhanu, a dancer in Australia, combines Ballet, Odissi and Bharata Natyam. Many years ago, the Singapore Fine Arts staged the Ramayana in Chennai, which was hardly traditional but was a visual treat.

However, nothing can be a challenge to traditional Bharata Natyam. A great dance form discovered by Bharat Muni, it started as a temple ritual by devadasis, captured audiences in towns and cities, and has now gone global. It has its own special audiences.

Recently we read about Chinese learning Bharata natyam in China. Would they be able to do full justice to the dance form?

We must appreciate that someone came from that country, learnt Bharata Natyam here, and is now taking classes for the local people there. They may not be able to emote as well as we do and may have other limitations. But it is always nice to learn something new.

Dance is often suggested as a therapy for disabled people. Does it really help?

I think it plays on their psyche that they can also achieve. It is a change from their mundane existence. Some time back, a troupe from the Clarke School of Deaf and Dumb in Chennai performed Bharata Natyam for eight minutes. Their synchronization was amazing. But they cannot perform for more than an hour, and can only evoke feelings of sympathy and concern in the audience.

Who are your idols?

I admire Alarmelu Valli, Padma Subrahmanyam and Malavika Sarukkai. M. S. Subbulakshmi Amma was a living goddess to me. She lit the kuthuvillakku at one of my performances in 1996. She intended to stay for just five minutes but sat through for 11/2 hours. This was a great compliment. My mind is very open and I take the good from everyone.

How different is a dancer's life compared to that of others?

Dance is a visual art and we must be presentable, although we need not aspire to be a Miss World or Miss Universe. This involves a disciplined lifestyle and a normal diet coupled with good practice sessions.

The LCM factor comes into effect, that is, if the performance reaches the Lowest Common Man, it means the dancer is fantastic. I feel thrilled when the camera man or the stage decorator come and praise my dance. We must be able to make those who do not comprehend dance, understand the story.

Can you narrate some interesting episode in your life?

In 1995, I performed in a primary school in Japan. The audience comprised a host of fair, rosy-cheeked Japanese children. Each one was a doll. After the programme, one of them sketched a beautiful portrait of me, and presented it to me. I was so moved that I hugged and kissed the child.

By now all the others started crying. One of the teachers explained to me that they were feeling left out. So she made the children stand in a straight line and I went about kissing each child – about 60 to 70 of them. I can never forget this experience.

On another occasion, Sri Kunnakudi Vaidyanathan explained my name to the audience in the following manner: ‘Sree’ means ‘Lakshmi’, ‘Kala’ means Saraswathy, and ‘Bharat’ refers to ‘Bharata natyam.’ Her name contains everything!

How did you handle academics and Bharata Natyam as a child?

There was no pressure to study either from my school or my parents like there is today. I may not have got a first rank but I did get a first class. I would accompany my guru everywhere and this resulted in a shortage of attendance. When the principal pulled up my father for this, he reacted by saying, “Academics can be gained by reading books but everyone is not gifted with a talent.”

I did my arangetram when I was ten years old. I got married when I was still in my final year in college and my son was born when I was only 23. But I studied and performed. It was not a problem.

What is your mantra for success?

The three Ds – Devotion, Dedication and Determination – is my mantra. Coupled with this, if destiny - God’s grace and luck – is favourable, you will hit the top. Try, try, try! Don’t mind the brickbats. The harder you work, the luckier you get. Every child is a winner. Along with this, if you are talented, you will be a fast winner!