

Kamala at seventy five



Famed in India as “Kumari Kamala” during her prime as a dancer, the acclaimed Bharatanatyam exponent has dedicated about seven decades of her life to its propagation. Endowed with a rare and uncommon prowess at the art, her name has become synonymous with the dance form. She began performing classical dances in many Indian films in several languages, including Hindi, since the late 1930s at the age of five, till about the mid-1960s. One of her best known films includes, *Naam Iruvar* in Tamil, based on the patriotic songs of Tamil poet Subramania Bharati. Kamala has given thousands of stage performances in India, and was the country’s unofficial cultural envoy to many different countries. At the Indian government’s behest, she performed before many visiting foreign dignitaries to India, including President Dwight Eisenhower and Queen Elizabeth. Kamala Narayan received the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1968 and was awarded the Padma Bhushan in 1970. The elderly artist who turned 75 on 14th June this year, has been living in the New York metropolitan area since 1980 and runs a dance school, Sri Bharata Kamalalaya.

On the occasion of the 28th anniversary of Kamala’s

dance school in New York, UMA DANDAPANI gives us a glimpse into Kamala’s life in the United States.

Kamala Narayan seemed to morph from deities chiselled in graceful stances inside a temple sanctum. Images in black and white from decades ago, of the young and lithe dancer captured in statuesque poses, became vivid and real, as she choreographed for a recent show by the students of her school, at the Yonkers Public Library auditorium in Westchester County, New York. Her school, Sri Bharata Kamalalaya, is based in Long Island, New York, where she has lived since 1980, but the septuagenarian with an unflagging passion for the art, commutes weekly to Westchester County and New Jersey, to conduct dance lessons for her young students.

On a wintry morning, she was watching a rehearsal by her students, to prerecorded music playing on a stereo deck. The tenderness and ardour of the raga, Brindavana Saranga, in a lilting paean to Krishna composed by Subramania Bharati, lent a tropical balminess to the spacious hall of the India Center of Westchester County, Inc., located in Elmsford, New York. The elderly artist looked petite and trim, wearing a coiffure and dressed in a taupe and maroon salwar kameez. Her chiselled features, accentuated by her soft and pleasantly pitched voice, seemed to conceal a latent energy that sparked into life as she demonstrated dance movements to her young students, her feet maintaining an unerring rhythm as she moved, synchronised by the positions of her arms and hands, while her eyes darted in each of those directions. With her students in Westchester County, ranging in age between five to the twenties, and divided into groups

Blooming in an alien land

varying from beginners to advanced, the dance guru was generous with praise, using gentle humour to keep them

focused on the coordinated moves as they danced. She showed a meticulous approach to the instruction.

“I don’t compromise with my students. Regardless of whether they are strong or weak, I teach them the same lesson so that they can improve themselves,” she said, while explaining that the deep plie posture, or the araimandi, is de rigueur for the dancer. “Your eyes should follow the arm movements,” she said, explaining one more aspect of the dance to her young students, as they were engrossed in the challenge of coordinating the movements of their feet with those of their arms and hands.

Kamala radiated the beauty of Bharatanatyam to an Indian public through her classical dances in scores of Indian films made in several languages. Many of these were choreographed by her dance guru, Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. She also gave hundreds of stage performances between the 1940s through the 1970s, exuded a sensuousness and verve that attracted waves of enthusiasts. Bharatanatyam was a redeemed classical art, and Kamala its most luminous exemplar.

One of the many dances that became synonymous with the image of Kamala, both onscreen and in stage performances, was the snake dance choreographed by her guru, the most popular version being, “*Naadar mudi mel irukkum naagapaambe*”.

Reminiscing over the formative years of her career, she admitted to being “a follower” of Balasaraswati whose performances she had watched as a young child, while accompanied by her mother. “When she danced”, she recalled with reference to the late artist, “there was a glow on her face. And her expressions were beautiful!”

Kamala’s veneration of her guru Ramiah Pillai is fervent. Kamala recalled that her “guruji’s sollukattu-s were excellent. He brought out the life (of the dance) in sollukattu-s, in jati korvai-s, and in nattuvangam.”

Among the many accolades that Kamala received through her career, were the Kalasikhamani in 1967-68 (that was renamed the Kalaimamani) from the government of Tamil Nadu, the central Sangeet Natak Akademi award in 1968, the Padma Bhushan in 1970, the Platinum Jubilee Award from Chennai’s Music Academy in January 2002, the Sangeethasaagara Lifetime Achievement Award in June 2004 from the Carnatic Music Association of North America (CMANA), and more recently, the Natya Padmam in December 2007, from Chennai’s Brahma Gana Sabha.

In 1980, in reaction to apathy perceived by Kamala, on the part of the government of Tamil Nadu, she moved to the United States and settled in New York, where she believed there were more attractive opportunities for the propagation of Bharatanatyam. Since beginning her school in 1980 and staging annual dance ballets based on themes from Hindu mythology, with students trained by her, Kamala was able to assemble a dance orchestra from local talent among Indian Americans, many of whom were trained in India during their youth. “Since I know music, I have been able to train people to sing for the dances,” said Kamala.

Kamala believes that children should be initiated into Bharatanatyam around the age of five. When asked if their skills at the coordinated movements of the dance improved with age, she insisted that an earlier start helped shape children into better dancers. Beginners and intermediate level dancers get group lessons until they are taught “one margam, or six to seven items,” after which they are given private lessons, said the dance guru, referring to the repertoire required of students being trained for the arangetram, which is usually after a period of four or more years.

When asked whether a career in Bharatanatyam is financially remunerative in this environment, Kamala exclaimed, “Financially, my God!” as if the query were preposterous. “It is depressing!” she said flatly. “When my students see me struggling, they don’t want to take it up as a career. I wish I had learned some computer skills and made better money than sticking to Bharatanatyam! All my life, I have spent dancing. I never had the chance to go to college and develop other skills. Like Sivaji Ganesan, or M.S. Subbulakshmi — they did not have any other skills besides acting, or music. Very hard for me here,” she explained despondently. Kamala taught an undergraduate course in Bharatanatyam at the Center for Indian Studies at SUNY in Stony Brook, New York, between 1999 to 2003, and said that she used to get grants a few years earlier, but that those opportunities have now gone to younger people. “They know how to write well for the grants and talk to people and their job is done. They try to promote mediocrity with a lot of public relations,” she said dejectedly. “I would definitely appreciate someone coming forward and saying, “This is a great art and it deserves a pat on the shoulder.” And give us some financial help, she added. The elderly artist no longer does full fledged solo performances, “because of age. You can’t run away from it. It slowly comes in. It’s like a sunset,” she said with a chuckle.

At the India Center in Elmsford, New York, Kamala ends her classes with a short prayer and places her hands in benediction, on every student’s head, with the traditional Sanskrit blessing from the elderly for a long life. “You must always have the guru’s blessing,” she explains to them softly with a smile. After four hours conducting lessons, she gathers her things, leaving the venue with quiet dignity, and drives off to her classes in Long Island; an artistic gem of India forgotten in the shuffle of life in suburban America. ■