

Reproduced from *Sruti* 247

K.J. SARASA
A Natyacharya With A Distinguished Record

K.J. Sarasa has the distinction of being one of the first and most successful lady nattuvanar-s of the traditional community in modern times. She is a famous Bharatanatyam guru who has carried aloft the flag of the Vazhuvoor tradition of Bharatanatyam most impressively for more than five decades. The Sruti Foundation honoured her with the E. Krishna Iyer Medal for 2004 on 15th March 2005 in Chennai. Karaikal Jagadeesan Sarasa had turned 68 five days earlier.

SAMUDRI ARCHIVES



Sarasa was born to Jagadeesan and Valliammal in Karaikal on 10th March 1937. Her ancestors were court musicians who enjoyed the patronage of the Tanjavur rulers. Her grandfather Rajagopalan was the asthana vidwan of the Tirunallar temple. Her father Jagadeesan Pillai and her uncle Natesan Pillai were nagaswara artists in Tanjavur. Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai was related to the family and K.N. Dandayudhapani Pillai was her paternal cousin.

Sarasa spent her early childhood in Karaikal. When the little girl saw "Baby" Kamala perform, she fell in love with dance. She wanted to learn the art and soon got an opportunity to do so when natyacharya Kattumannarkoil Muthukumara Pillai-- Kamala's first guru-- agreed to come from Mayavaram every week to teach a few children. This continued for about a year. "He had an inspiring personality," recalls Sarasa. But Muthukumara Pillai was a busy nattuvanar and found it difficult to make the weekly journey to Karaikal. He therefore suggested that Sarasa should learn from Vazhuvoor Ramiah Pillai. Sarasa's parents did not have any apprehensions about sending their daughter to Madras with Ramiah Pillai as he was a part of the extended family....

...Sarasa would often accompany Ramiah Pillai to the film studios and to the homes of some of his disciples when he went there to take classes. She has choreographed dances for about ten films for actresses like E.V. Saroja, Rajashree, etc. but gave up since her timings and the shooting schedules did not match....

...Sarasa is well versed in Carnatic music having learnt from well-known guru-s like Ramanathapuram Krishnan, Rajagopala Iyengar, and Valliyoora Gurumurthy. "Appa would wake us up before daybreak and make us do *saadhakam*," recalls Sarasa who has also given some solo Carnatic vocal recitals.

With Ramiah Pillai's encouragement Sarasa had started taking dance classes even as a teenager. Her first student to perform an arangetram was Rathna Papa who started learning in 1952 and made her formal debut in 1956. Seated in a rickshaw, Sarasa would

go to the house of her students like Sivasankari (now a famous writer), and Jayalalitha (now Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu)....

...Sarasa moved from Ramiah Pillai's gurukulam to a house on Bheemanna Mudali Garden Street where she established her dance school Sarasalaya in 1960. It was there that she taught for about 25 years before moving to her present residence in Rani Annadurai Street in Mandaveli in the 1980s....

...Sarasakka or Sarasamma, as she is popularly known, has conducted more than 500 arangetram-s and over a 1000 Bharatanatyam recitals. She has groomed hundreds of students, many of whom have established a name for themselves in the field of Bharatanatyam as good performers and teachers....

Sarasa established a branch of Sarasalaya in Coimbatore in 1974....

...Sarasa and her troupe of talented dancers travelled far and wide in the sixties and seventies in India-- to places like Gujarat, Calcutta, Patna, Nagaland, Manipur-- and abroad, and won awards and accolades....

Over the years, Sarasa has produced and choreographed more than 50 dance productions. Many dance-dramas like *Sakuntalam*, *Vikramorvasiyam*, *Krishna Parijatam*, *Aditya Hridayam*, *Silappadikaram*, *Kunrakudi Kuravanji*, *Desa Bhakti* and *Kutrala Kuravanji* have won acclaim from varied audiences. The first two won the Swarna Kalasa award at the Kalidas Samaroh in Ujjain in 1966 and 1969 respectively....

Guru K.J. Sarasa's style is marked by grace, ornamentation, sculpturesque poses, sparkling glances and the charm of the traditional Vazhuvoor style of Bharatanatyam. She has imbibed the true spirit of the Vazhuvoor tradition. Her emphasis is on encouraging individuality and creativity within the confines of tradition and not on imparting an assembly-line uniformity and rigidity in her disciples. Sarasa has always been open to accepting what is good in other bani-s as well as in encouraging individual dancers to be imaginative in their presentations....

Her nattuvangam has good "taalakattu" and is aurally and visually pleasing, with no "aarbaattam" (undue fuss) on stage. Apart from teaching traditional items of the Bharatanatyam repertoire Sarasa has also choreographed dance for many popular compositions-- old and new....

It is quite amazing how Sarasa-- a single young woman established a name for herself in Madras in the nineteen sixties and has since emerged as a highly respected natyacharya on the strength of her art...

Sarasalaya celebrated its golden jubilee in a big way with a two-day festival on 5th and 6th February 1999 in Chennai. (See *Sruti* 176).

...Sarasa was appointed Honorary Director of the Bharatanatyam department at the Tamil Nadu Government Music College in 1992....

K.J. Sarasa is the recipient of many prestigious awards, honours and titles. The latest jewels in her crown are the Isai Peraringnar title conferred by the Tamil Isai Sangam in December 2004 and the E. Krishna Iyer Medal awarded by the Sruti Foundation in 2005, both in Chennai.

...Looking back on her life, Sarasa says she is happy and contented as she has led a full life. "It is a good feeling to sit back and watch my disciples, who are all my children, doing well as dancers and teachers."

...Such is her zest for life and dance.

**S. JANAKI with inputs from
V. KARPAGALAKSHMI**

Read Hard Copy for more details

Sarasa's Views - *As told to V. KARPAGALAKSHMI in the 1990s (from our archives).*

To Teacher... With Love - By RATHNA (PAPA) KUMAR, Sarasa's first student. She is a Bharatanatyam and Koochipoodi exponent and the Director of Anjali Centre for Performing Arts in Houston, Texas, U.S.A.

A Teacher... In The True Sense - By SEETHA RATNAKAR, Assistant Station Director, Doordarshan Kendra - Chennai.

A Remarkable Teacher - By URMILA SATHYANARAYANAN, a senior disciple of Sarasa, is a famous Bharatanatyam dancer and runs her own dance school Natya Sankalpaa in Chennai.

My Guru And Mentor - By dancer A. LAKSHMAN is a senior disciple of Sarasa and runs his own dance school, Nrityalakshana in Chennai.

From The Album - Has very interesting photos of K.J. Sarasa