

# Kandappa Nattuvanar

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**K**andappa Anna — 'Elder Brother Kandappa' — was Bala-saraswati's teacher and also the conductor of her dance recitals for many years. He was the son of Nellaiyappa Nattuvanar (1850-1905) and a descendant, through the female line, of Tanjavur Chinniah, the eldest of the immortal Tanjavur Quartet. Nellaiyappa migrated to Madras city where he trained a number of pupils, Mylapore Gowri Amma and Jayammal — Bala's mother — among them, to perform Kolattam or stick-dance using Chinniah's javalis. He also helped expand the repertoire of Dhanammal's family, adding to it many popular javalis; *Vanipondu* (Kanada), *Yela Radayane* (Bhairavi), *Chanaro ee Mohamu* (Khamas) are his gifts. He was very closely associated with Dhanammal as well as composer-musicians like Muthialpet Tyagier and Fiddle Ponnuswami Pillai.

Nellaiyappa died prematurely. This forced Kandappa to return to Tanjavur where he became a pupil of Kannuswami Nattuvanar whose other students of nattuvangam included two others who had achieved fame already: Kannuswami's brother-in-law Pandanallur Minakshisundaram Pillai and his son K. Ponniah Pillai. Kandappa's guru was better known as Baroda Kannuswami Pillai because he had led to the Baroda court a team of Bharatanatyam dancers — part of the dowry for the Tanjavur Maratha princess wedded to a Baroda prince.

Kandappa completed his training as nattuvanar and moved back to Madras to join Gowri Amma's orchestra as conductor. Like Gowri Amma, Kandappa too spent most of his time with Dhanammal's family. He was one of the few rasikas Dhanammal trusted to carry her vina to and from her famous Friday soirees, and was the invariable mridangam accompanist at the recitals of her daughters. He immersed himself in the Dhanam tradition. And, having come close to Dhanammal, he pleaded with her for her consent to launch Bala into a dancing career — and won his battle.

Kandappa had a pleasant voice and would sing all day long or keep strumming the tanpura. He was a gifted singer too but once a compliment turned him very sour. This happened when my father, after listening to Kandappa rendering the Sankarabharanam padam *Sunta Sepu*, said to him: "You sing it as evocatively as Jayammal."

Kandappa took this as an insult and gave up singing padams for

ever, and in due course Jayammal became the principal chorister for Bala.

Kandappa was deeply sensitive to social trends and felt the need for imminent reform if dance were to regain social esteem. He dispensed with the ottu or pipe-like drone in favour of a pair of tanpuras. He bade his men in the orchestra give up their old-fashioned attire and take their seats on the right edge of the concert platform instead of moving forwards and backwards with the dancer. He had no use for the time-honoured preliminary Mela-prapti — playing of the mridangam and cymbals behind the curtain to create atmosphere — and preferred to start off dance recitals with an invocatory prelude. He replaced the mukhavina with the flute. In general he was for abolishing anything crude. His ideas chimed with the insistence of Dhanammal that dancing should be conditioned by fine music.

Kandappa was an uncompromising purist and a perfectionist who never spared the rod. The laya wizard Konnakkol Paḅkiria Pillai, Kanchipuram Naina Pillai and Sangita Kalanidhi Ponniah Pillai were mentors of both Kandappa and Bala — who collected trophies in the shape of a korvai (a string of rhythmic syllables), a sruti box and a jatiswaram in Purvikalyani respectively from the three.

Kandappa's exposure to Kathak at the All India Music Conference in Benares kindled his aesthetic response to the bols, twists and turns of the north Indian form and they were adapted and absorbed in the tillanas taught to Bala. When a rheumatic heart incapacitated Bala's dancing legs, Kandappa joined Uday Shankar's Art Centre at Almora, founded in 1938. Here he was in the company of other celebrated dance gurus such as Sankaran Nambudri, Amubi Singh and Ustad Allaiddin Khan. Several top-ranking musicians and disciples welcomed him back at Madras with a 'guard of honour' at the Madras Central Station, entertaining the fond hope of seeing him and Bala together on the stage again. But alas, Kandappa passed away soon, in February 1941, leaving his son K. Ganesan and colleague Kanchipuram Ellappa Nattuvanar to fulfil his mission of raising Bala phoenix-like from the ashes of her spoilt career.

K. Ganesan (b. 1924), only sixteen at Kandappa's death, came to stay with Jayammal, and grew up with her sons Ranga and Viswa. He profited by the musical atmosphere of the home and the grooming of Elappa Nattuvanar, and was later Bala's dance-master in India, Japan, Edinburgh and the United States. He also taught in Bala's dance school. Jon Higgins, the American vocalist and scholar, benefitted much from Ganesan's help in completing his doctoral thesis on the music of Bharatanatyam.

Bala at the apogee of her career recalled her guru's inimitable ways and sure guidance. She missed him very badly for she had none to whom she could confess the mistakes she committed in performances. The dance school she established was to perpetuate Kandappa's