

CHAPTER X

DANCES OF THE DEVADASIS

(*Bharata-Natyam Style*)

The first dance-drama was presented in the celestial Court of Indra, King of the Devas. Brahma, the Great Guru, who brought forth the *Natya Veda*, commanded the sage Bharata to produce a dance-drama in honour of Indra's victory over the Danavas, enemies of the Gods.

Bharatamuni rehearsed his one hundred sons, but when it came to the graceful *Kaisiki* dancing he realized that only women could properly dance the graceful style. He informed Brahma of his difficulty and Brahma then created the *Apsaras*, celestial nymphs, to take part in the *Natya*.

When the play was about to begin in celebration of the Banner Festival of Indra, the Danavas, who were displeased at the subject of the play, employed supernatural powers which caused the actors to remain immovable and speechless. Indra, in great anger, seized his jewelled banner staff (*Indra Dhvaja*) and beat the Danavas. Thus the *Indra Dhvaja* was henceforth called *Jarjara* and Indra said, "Let it be so : this *Jarjara* will be the protection of all actors." Worship was then offered to the Gods to ward off evil forces—and ensure the success of the play. The *Jarjara*, appropriately decorated and garlanded, was consecrated with a *mantra*. These preliminary rites were called *Purvaranga* and the ritual procedure was recorded in great detail in the *Natya Sastra* of Bharata.

The *Jarjara* came to earth when Jayanta, the son of Indra, was reborn as a bamboo tree because of a curse. Once when the *Apsara Urvasi* was performing an enchanting dance before Indra Deva, her glance met the impassioned gaze of Jayanta, and for a moment her mind was diverted from the dance. The sage Agastya, observing this, became angry and pronounced a curse upon Urvasi and Jayanta. Urvasi was to be born on earth as a *Devadasi* (a votary of the Gods), and Jayanta was to be born as a bamboo tree in the *Vindhya Hills*. Urvasi and Jayanta fell at the feet of the great sage and begged him to retract his curse. Agastya then decreed that when Urvasi would have her debut or *Arangetral* as a dancer before God, she would be presented with the *Thalaikole* (Jayanta in the form of a bamboo staff). Then the curse would be lifted and Urvasi and Jayanta would ascend to Heaven. Urvasi was re-born on earth

as a Devadasi in Kancheepuram. On the day of her *Arangetral*, the *Thalaikole* was presented to her. At that moment Urvasi and Jayanta were freed from the curse and ascended to the celestial abode of Indra Deva.

Urvasi is said to have taught dancing to the Devadasis, temple dancers of South India. Their devotional dances were an essential part of temple service for centuries, and the Devadasis were highly revered and admired in the community. Dedicated to temples in early childhood, young girls were taught the arts of classical dance and music by dance masters, called *Nattuvanars*, attached to the temple. The dedication ceremony of a Devadasi was performed by the temple priest who tied the marriage Bottu (Tali) around the neck of the Dasi and married her to the diety of the shrine. Devadasis were called *Nitya Sumangalis*, 'eternally married!'

The beginning of dance training was a solemn and ceremonious occasion with worship, flower offering, music and obeisance to the *Nattuvanar*. Anklets of bells were tied, and the young Devadasi danced the first rhythmic beats of her feet while holding a symbolic bamboo staff wrapped in silk. On completion of seven years of training in dance and song, the first dance performance (*Arangetral*) took place in the temple, in the presence of the king, and the accomplished dancer was given the title of '*Thalaikole*'.¹ She had various ritual duties to perform in the daily temple service, in addition to devotional songs and dances.

Under the lavish patronage of the great Chola King, Raja Raja Deva I (984 to 1020 A. D.), four hundred dancing girls were settled at Tanjore as Devadasis to perform ritual dances and ceremonies in Bhrahadiswara Temple. There were also Rajadasis, who danced at royal functions, and Alankara-dasis who danced at marriages, and other social ceremonies.

The classical dance was first taught by Bhagavata Melas or Brahmin guilds, and later came into the hands of Nattuva Melas, or non-Brahmin guilds. Even to-day the Nattuvans guard the secrets of their art which is derived from the *Natya Sastra*, and is now popularly re-named '*Bharata Natyam*'. Other names for the art are Dasi Attam, Sadir Natya and Nattuva Mela.

¹ Reference to the '*Thalaikole*' is found in *Silappidiskaram*, a Tamil classic of the second century A. D. The *Arangetral* of *Madhavi*, a dancing girl takes place at the Indra Festival, in the presence of the king. The '*Thalaikole*' encased in gold, and set with precious gems is placed upon the stage (*Arangam*).