

## Footloose and fancy free

with Dr. Sunil Kothari

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### Vasundhara Performing Arts Centre presented Sapthati

Photos courtesy: Sruti Sagar Hirasave

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On the occasion of the 70th birthday of Bharatanatyam exponent Dr. Vasundhara Doraswamy, Vasundhara Performing Arts Centre and Guru Shishya Parampara Trust presented a unique event including workshop and performances by disciples of Vasundhara on 1st November at Jagmohan Palace Hall, Mysore. It was on a grand scale and organized in a manner which won appreciation of one and all present there to wish Vasundhara a happy birthday.



Vasundhara with her disciples  
(Photo: Sunil Kothari)

Compered by Dr. Bhuvanewari, dancer and disciple of Vasundhara and currently a faculty member of Dr. Gangubai Hangal University of Music and Performing Arts, it was an event that showcased the excellent training Vasundhara has given to her innumerable disciples over the years. More than hundred students had worked out the event befitting their Guru's achievements. Mention in particular must be made of her principal disciple Varija Nalige, who had choreographed several excerpts of Vasundhara's solos and choreographic works which were danced in a seamless manner. I was lucky sitting next to Vasundhara's son Sruti Sagar Hirasave, now settled in Melbourne, drawing attention to the various works of Vasundhara. It was quite mindboggling and mesmerizing, the way the dancers appeared on the stage one after another so smoothly without ever colliding and taking positions on the vast stage.

They performed and invited Vasundhara on stage and offered her their pranams. The devotion and love for their Guru were so transparent that one was deeply touched at this spontaneous expression. The hall was overflowing with admirers of Vasundhara, a tribute to her lifetime service. I was told that on

previous day more than 100 students had registered for day long workshop. Vasundhara's disciples from USA, UK, Singapore, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Qatar, Bangalore and local had assembled to felicitate and dance on this occasion. As the author of the book 'Vasundhara: Odyssey of a Dancer', Prof George S Paul told me that it was like another Dussera celebrations in Mysore.



Vasundhara conducts workshop

I had visited Mysore for the first time forty years ago when Vasundhara and her husband Doraswamy had invited me to the festival they had mounted featuring performances by Vasundhara and her students. The legendary dance critic Subbudu was also invited. And from Bangalore, teenage dancer Kiran Subrahmanyam had also come and played upon mridangam eliciting praise from Subbudu. I was duly impressed by Vasundhara's performance and had carried happy memories of it. Over the years those impressions were further enhanced seeing her performances in Mumbai at Kal Ke Kalakar and Sur Singar Samsad as she was awarded Singar Mani award. When I was commissioned to write a book on Bharatanatyam for Marg publications by Dr. Mulk

Raj Anand, the dancers from Mysore whom I had then known were the legendary Venkatalakshamma, her daughter Shakuntala, and Vasundhara.

In those years, I was told that Vasundhara had studied dance from her very young age at her birthplace Moodabidri under one Muralidhar Rao. He had studied under Salem Rajaratnam Pillai (not to be confused with SK Rajaratnam Pillai). Salem Rajaratnam Pillai was a direct disciple of Pandanallur Meenakshisundaram Pillai, and was well versed in Pandanallur bani. He was earlier invited by Vallathol Narayana Menon at Kerala Kalamandalam to teach Bharatanatyam. Thus Vasundhara's foundation was strong and she blossomed into the Pandanallur bani. The story of Vasundhara's life is well documented by Prof George in the biography he has written which was released next day at Kalamandir Hall.



Vasundhara stepping in



Chenda players

The celebrations next day were even more elaborate and grand. At the entrance was a team of chenda players welcoming the guests. Vasundhara was brought in a special car, fully dressed in costume to perform a one hour long presentation of her favourite solo of Sita. She was brought in a procession and her disciples showered flowers all the way up to the hall. At entrance she was asked to dip her feet in kumkum and on a white chaddar, imprint of her feet were taken by the disciples. We were then led to the exhibition of various photographs of Vasundhara, her family, her performances, the innumerable awards she had won, the brochures, program books, her books including the one she has written on Yoga and dance, photos of her taking Yoga lessons and Kalaripayattu lessons, her dance gurus, Yoga gurus, press clippings and what have you. Meticulously curated, the exhibition was a delight to go through and well documented by her disciples.

The evening began with screenings of videos which included a message of Australia based Mohiniattam exponent Tara Rajkumar. Sruti Sagar is settled there with his wife Meghala, a disciple of Vasundhara, and she has been teaching Bharatanatyam and Yoga there at her institution 'Art of Vinyasa.' Meghala came in close touch with Tara Rajkumar and under her guidance and suggestions, she has started celebration of World Dance Day and managed to get the dancers in Melbourne together. She has served as the Secretary and Advisor for dance at the Federation of Indian Music and Dance, Victoria, and has been a major contributor to Indian classical dance and music fraternity in Australia. Meghala has recently won the Community Services Award from Federation of Indian Associations, Victoria. Tara Rajkumar spoke with great admiration for Vasundhara's art and her reach beyond India. The videos projected rare photos of Vasundhara's dances and solos and would be very important documentation on her life and work.

### Solo performance of Sita



Vasundhara in 'Sita'

The evening began with much awaited solo performance of Vasundhara's favorite Sita. All seemed agog to see how at 70, Vasundhara was to perform it for more than an hour, complete with cascades of teermanams in nritta aspect and delectable abhinaya. Vasundhara has kept her health fit and figure perfect, she belies her age. She attributes it to her practice of Yoga.

The performance was with accompaniment of a team of her musicians of long standing. Nattuvangam was by her former disciple Sandesh Bhargava, vocal by Pustakam Rama, mridangam by Sivashankarswami who has been accompanying her for more than three decades, flute by young Krishnaprasad, a disciple of his father who in turn had studied under flute Mali, vachika rendering by renowned litterateur Jayalakshmi, and rhythm was by Ananta Krishnaswamy.

Vasundhara entered from behind the curtain, looking resplendent as daughter of King Janaka. The performance was further enhanced by the use of a screen and Vasundhara projected silhouette images dramatically. The performance began with Sita's soliloquy speaking to her mother Bhumi. Recalling her past, Sita tells her mother to take her to her bosom. Then with flashback, the enactment of various key events from Ramayana started. Addressed as Ramapriye, Sita Mahamate, Sita virtually appears before our eyes as a woman of great purity, a noble woman. She tells Ram when he prepares to leave for forest that the world is empty without him, 'Jag shunyam,' and follows Ram, staying happily in Panachvati. Vasundhara has imaginatively choreographed sequence of golden deer's arrival. Sita is preparing a garland for Lord Ram and from behind the golden deer comes and touches her. Sita wonders at such delicate touch and is moved seeing the golden deer. She tries to catch it but the deer eludes her, however she tries to entice. The utplavanas, the jumps of deer were gracefully executed by Vasundhara. Abbreviating the tale, Ravana's entry as a mendicant and with 'Bhikshan dehi', compels Sita to cross the Lakshmana rekha; with *attahasya* laughter revealing his original form, he kidnaps her. The quick transition from the character of Ravana to helpless Sita is of consummate artistry. Vasundhara excels in this aspect. The various emotions register on her mobile visage and eloquent eyes.

The narration in Kannada carries forward the events. Ravana's entreaties begging her to accept him, addressing her as Lankalakshmi, Kamalakshi, fall on deaf ears. Sita rejects Ravana's advances and remembers Ram, the ornaments she throws on the way, hoping Ram would see them and know where she is being held captive. The arrival of Hanuman was enacted by Vasundhara with touch of humour. The way monkeys move, hop and jump and transformation of that to *dhira gambhir* Hanuman was received with rounds of applause. The shooting of arrows between Ravana and Ram had all the heroic quality and impact of Vasundhara's command over martial arts. The *alidha* and *pratyalidha sthanakas* were used with great advantage, the body becoming taut and arms stretching the bow and releasing the arrows were performed with commendable dramatic force.

After vanquishing Ravana, when Ram did not receive her and Sita had to go through *agni pariksha*, the fire ordeal, was rendered movingly, evoking great sympathy for Sita. The heart-rending dialogue enhanced the karuna rasa. Returning to Ayodhya where they were received with great joy, one washerman taunts his wife for her infidelity. Her repartee that Ram himself has kept Sita despite her having been captive in Ravana's palace, she is above suspicion but she is being accused of infidelity, causes great agony to Ram and for maintaining dharma, Ram banishes Sita to forest even though she was expecting his children. The entire episode is so tragic that whenever it is staged, it moves the audience.

Sita tells her mother the injustice done to her. When she was raising Lava and Kusha in forest in ashram of Valmiki, Ram was conducting Yagna. It is said that when Kusha and Lava went to Ram and recited Ramkatha, Ram realized what punishment he had extended to Sita and he wanted to see her. He begged her to return, but Sita did not. She asks her mother why women have to suffer so much. Why as a wife she has to put up with such injustice. She would rather be with her and she enters into the lap of Bhummimata. Vasundhara has envisioned that scene with a few steps on the stage which she climbs and descends on the other side and disappears.

The entire presentation was so intense that at the end, entire audience stood up and gave her a standing ovation. It was a memorable performance with immense intensity and identification with the character. Vasundhara is known for such moving solos which have won her great encomiums.

**Release of the biography 'Vasundhara: Odyssey of a Dancer'**



Book release

After the performance, the biography was released in the presence of Sri Shivaratri Deshikendra Mahaswamiji of Suttur Veerasimhasana Mutt. The author spoke about the book and how it was conceived. Vasundhara is an extremely low profile person and to draw out from her the details of her childhood memories and her stature as a senior dancer was a tough task. Prof George S Paul is a professor of Physics and an art critic of repute. An authority on music and performing arts, his book 'Swarangalude Sastram' in Malayalam dwells on the evolution of music. His abiding love for Kathakali saw him nominated on committees of Kerala Sangeet Natak Akademi and also for teaching subject medium at Kerala Kalamandalam. He has received Mukundraja Puraskaram for his valuable contribution to music and art journalism.

Being a family friend, he was able to recollect many events in life of his dear friend Doraswamy, husband of Vasundhara. He is also a close friend of T.R. Harish, cousin of Doraswamy. With material given by Sruti Sagar and several disciples, long skype interviews when Vasundhara was in Melbourne, somehow George managed to put the information together and has written an excellent biography of Vasundhara, her trials and tribulations and

accepting challenges in life to keep up her lifelong love for classical Bharatanatyam and reaching to the top in her career. It makes a fascinating reading and would inspire the present generation of dancers. Illustrated with a series of photographs and published on art paper by Notion Press with branches in India, Singapore and Malaysia, it is a collector's item.

[\(The Book Review\)](#).



Yamini Muthanna ; Photo: Sunil Kothari

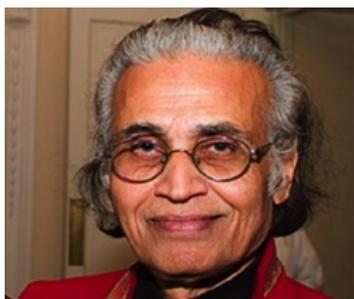


Meghala

After the release function and felicitations by Swamiji, dance tributes by teachers and students were presented. The performances by them, in particular group choreography of *Om Namah Shivaya* weaving in various episodes of Siva, his ardhnanari form, the various lingams, akasha lingam at Chidambaram, the story of halahala poison while churning ocean being swallowed by Lord Shiva, and hence his name of Nilakantha, the elaborate sancharis with stories related to navarasas, were a treat. The excitement and enthusiasm spread among the audience.

The introductions of key figures behind the entire celebrations explained to some of us what Herculean task this event was. The 'unsung hero' as George describes T.R. Harish, the backbone of all these activities and Vasundhara Performing Arts Centre, of Varija and remarkable compere Bhuvaneshwari who held the audience attention, made one aware of their dedication.

It was for me a memorable two days. I have often seen Vasundhara in Bangalore. During my several visits to Bangalore, I wanted to visit Mysore to meet her and see her classes, but on account of her commitments and touring, it did not materialize. This event gave me an opportunity to learn more about her multifaceted career. By temperament, Vasundhara is a low profile person. Her humility is admirable. Never pushing herself, she carries on her work with passion. Among the several national and international awards, some she has won for her contribution to Yoga, and some like Rani Shantala award for dance. For her, dance is the biggest award she has received in her life.



**Dr. Sunil Kothari is a dance historian, scholar, author and critic, Padma Shri awardee and fellow, Sangeet Natak Akademi. Dance Critics' Association, New York, has honoured him with Lifetime Achievement award.**

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