



Geetha Vijayshankar

Mohiniattam Dancer and Teacher

-Lakshmi V



Great-grand-daughter of Mahakavi Kesava Pillai, Geetha Vijayshankar has carved a name for herself as a Mohiniattam and Kathakali dancer and a Mohiniattam teacher in Mumbai.

Geetha Vijayshankar started learning *Kathakali* at the young age of 8, initially under Kalamandalam Sekhar, later Ummanoor Gangadharan Pillai and then Nellyode Vasudevan Namboothiri. Her teachers in *mohiniattam* were Trippunithura Vijayabhanu, Udyogamandal Vikraman, Kalamandalam Meera Nambiar. Geetha recalls that her parents were so keen that she learnt these dance forms that the teachers used to stay at their home during vacations and teach her. Today Geetha is a well-known *Mohiniattam* dance teacher and dancer in Mumbai.

She has choreographed several classical dance ballets including *Aromal Unni*, *Unniyarcha*, *Kaliyuga varadan Ayyappan*, *Shree Krishna Leela*, *Shishyanum maganum*, (*Vallathol Composition*) and *Mary Magdalene*. She

has also choreographed *nrithyashilpam* (dance skits) namely *Geethopadesham*, *Dashavatharam* and recently *Devi Raagamalika* which she performed with her students at Marol Ayyappa Seva Sangham Mandala puja celebrations in December 2011. "The difference between skit and ballet is that in the former we wear the dance attire and act out the various roles in the dance while in ballet, the dancers wear the outfit according to the role they are dancing," she explains.

She learnt *Bharatanatyam* for some time under Kalamandalam Seethalakshmi. But her focus was more on *Mohiniattam* and for the past 28 years, she has been teaching *Mohiniattam* in Marol and several of her students have done their *arangettam* and performed at various stages in Mumbai.



Geetha Vijayshankar and her students performing 'Devi Raagamalika'

Geetha Vijayshankar comes from a family of artistes and lovers of fine arts. Her great grandfather is the noted Malayalam poet Mahakavi KC Kesava Pillai while her grandfather is the late R Narayana Panicker, National Award winner for Literature for his work Kerala Bhasha Sahitya Charitram. She has been fortunate to choreograph and present some of her great grandfather Kesava Pillai's poems in dance form.

Her mother Sarojini Amma was a teacher and retired as Headmistress of NSS High School in Kerala. She was also a Kaikottikali teacher. During her lifetime she was felicitated by the All Kerala Dance teachers' Association in Thiruvananthapuram. Geetha's father, the late PK Kesava Panicker was a freedom fighter.

Originally from Thiruvananthapuram, Geetha completed her schooling at places in Kerala where her mother worked as a teacher and completed her Postgraduation from University College in Thiruvananthapuram where she stood first and won the gold medal.

She continued learning *kathakali* and *mohiniattam* during her college days and has participated in dance competitions as a student. In fact she has won the first prize twice in *Kathakali* at the Kerala University Youth festival and also won the National Cultural scholarship for *kathakali*. In addition she has won several awards during her high school and college days at district, state and University levels.

Geetha got married in 1978 and came to Mumbai but she did not leave her dance

and continued her performances. At the same time she took up a job and has been a teacher of Chemistry at SIES College since 1984. She is presently Associate Professor of Chemistry.

"*Mohiniattam* is a dance that is full of grace, soothing and its specialities are swaying moments from the hip upwards and rotating of the head. It is a very feminine dance. To get a little mastery over this dance form, one has to learn at least for 6 years. There is *cholkettu*, *jathiswaram*, *varnam*, *thillana* and *ramasaptam* instead of *padam* (of *Bhratanatyam*)", she explains.

"To those who are learning *mohiniattam* or any classical dance form,

my advice is do not leave it midway, the reason being you are in the Std X or Std XII. Make a little time to continue your dance classes. For they are very relaxing and even if you do not want to take it up as a profession, you can develop dancing as your hobby," Geetha advises.

Geetha is also A Grade Artiste of TV and has performed for DD National, Malayalam and Mumbai DD channels. Her students have performed at several Malayalee samajams and organizations during Onam and Mandala puja celebrations at Mumbai temples and Mandals. She and her students have performed at Shanmukhananda Hall, Karnataka Sabha and other Halls upto Dombivli.

Geetha's husband A Vijayshankar retired as Vice Principal SIES College in Sion. He is a writer and is currently working on a Commentary on Bhagavad Gita. For four years in the '80s the couple were in Nigeria where he was on a teaching assignment and Geetha has performed *Mohiniattam* and *Kathakali* there and took these traditional dance forms of Kerala to the audience there.

Vijayshankar hails from Irinjalakuda, and he came to Mumbai after his post-graduation and secured a job here. They have a son Praveen who is Project Manager in Infosys, Pune, while his wife Arathi is B.Tech in Biotechnology. Praveen has learnt Carnatic music and violin.

Vijayshankar comperes the programmes of Geetha while her brother-in-law KS Menon, founder of Kerala Arts Club in Worli has scripted and directed her dance ballets.



Geetha with her husband Vijayshankar, daughter-in-law Arathi and son Praveen