

# Chitra Visweswaran

Eminent dancer-teacher- choreographer, Chitra Visweswaran, a legend in the field of Indian dance, has the distinction of being a scholar, thinker & seeker. Deep-rooted training in dance under Smt T.A.Rajalakshmi & the doyen Vazhuvoor Sri B Ramiah Pillai an eclectic background & inner thirst for knowledge launched her on a voyage of discovery at a young age. Her research directed towards the extension of the existing Bharatanatyam repertoire has led to the creation of a voluminous body of work, covering the margam, thematic solo, group /dance theatre productions, which reflect individuality and are a synergy of tradition & innovation. Her work has been enriched by the music of her vocalist- musician - composer husband, Visweswaran, who incidentally, was the nephew of the Carnatic Legend G N Balasubramaniam.

Chitra Visweswaran's formal training in dance began with Western Classical Ballet in London at the age of five, but, in actuality, her first Guru, at the age of three, was actually her mother, Smt. Rukmini Padmanabhan, who was an excellent dancer, trained in the Uday Shankar School of dance and Bharatanatyam. It is to her that Chitra owes her artistic and creative vision. To this was harnessed an insatiable intellectual and cerebral quest which she owes to her father, Sri. N. Padmanabhan, a brilliant Engineer.

After initiation into dance by her mother, Chitra undertook *training* in Western Classical Ballet in London, which was followed by training in Manipuri and Kathak in Calcutta. At the age of ten, she went under the tutelage of one of the best devadasis of Tiruvidaimardur, Smt.T.A.Rajalakshmi, who was settled in Calcutta. Her Arangetram (first maiden performance) took place within ten months, an astonishingly short period to achieve the degree of proficiency that Chitra did.

She continued her Bharatanatyam training in Kolkata and in parallel, studied the Uday Shankar School of dance. Her youth spent at Kolkata was studded with frequent, laudable, noteworthy stage appearances.

Not confining herself to the performing aspect of dance alone, Chitra, taking full advantage of the frequent closures of Calcutta University studied dance theory, dance history, philosophy and world religion entirely on her own and subsequently became deeply involved in interdisciplinary search and research.

In addition, Chitra learnt Carnatic Music, Rabindra Nritya, Rabindra Sangeet, lighting, stagecraft and as a youngster also acted in theatre productions.

In 1970, on completion of B.A. (Hons.) in English from Calcutta University, she received the National Scholarship for advanced study in Bharatanatyam from the Government of India, at a time when only two scholarships were awarded throughout the country. She spent her scholarship period of four years under the

doyen of Bharatanatyam, Vazhuvoor Ramaiyya Pillai, at Chennai. Her experience as his sishya widened her aesthetic vision even as her earlier Gurus' training gave her excellent grammar and technique.

On completion of her scholarship, Chitra started working on her own, bringing together the gift from her Gurus and her knowledge of the cognate forms of arts, harnessing to it a scholastic approach and holistic vision in order to develop a wholly individualistic philosophy of movement and language of communication. Her repertoire, which is vast and unique and entirely created by her, is born of intense research at all levels of interpretation.

Her holistic vision of dance and her husband musician-composer R Visweswaran's vision of music is ensured a continuum through Chidambaram Academy of Performing Arts, established by the couple at Chennai in 1975.

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- At thirteen, she choreographed the life of Saint Thyagaraja in the Varnam format as also started composing Jathi sollukattu.
- She is one of the first Bharatanatyam dancers to have composed her own jathi sollukattu and also the first dancer to have trained her students to do Nattuvangam professionally for the guru's (her) performances

## Awards Titles & Honours

A few amongst several titles and awards received nationally and internationally are as under:

- Padma Shri Conferred by President of India
- Sangeet Natak Akademi Puraskar Sangeet Natak Akademi
- Kalaimamani Tamilnadu Government
- Nrityachoodamani Sri Krishna Gana Sabha, Chennai
- Singar Mani Sur Singar Samsad, Mumbai
- Nritya Vilas Sur Singar Samsad, Mumbai
- Natya Padmam Brahma Gana Sabha
- Natya kala sarathy Sri Parthasarathy Swami Sabha
- Nrithya Kala Siromani Nungambakkam Cultural Academy Trust
- Nritya Ratna Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Coimbatore
- Sthree Ratna Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai
- Natya Ratna Ntithyodaya, Delhi
- Nritya Rathnakara Mylapore Fine Arts Club
- For the Sake of Honour Rotary Award
- Natya Kala Shikhamani The Indian Fine Arts Society
- Nritya Ratnakara" Bhairavi Fine Arts Cleveland Aradhana Committee

- Vishwa Kala Bharathi Bharat Kalachar
- Natya Selvam Muthamizh Peravai
- Yami Award Music Today
- Honorary citizenship of the City of Bourges, France
- In the year 2000, she was conferred the honour of being one of the most outstanding contributors to Indian Culture by the Japan Foundation
- Natya Kala Acharya Music Academy, Chennai
- Arsha Kala Bhushanam Pujyashri Swami Saraswati
- Womens International Day award, Chembur Fine Arts Mumbai
- Kittapa Pillai Memorial Award, Thanjavur
- Shrestha Kala Pracharak, Ganesha Natyalaya, New Delhi

## Landmark performances - performed

- In the presence of the Queen of Netherlands
- In the presence of the Pope John Paul
- At West Coast Inauguration of the Festival of India in the U.S.A., 1985
- At International Festival of Arts, Bulgaria, 1985
- At Festival of India in the U.S.S.R, 1987 (Inaugural presentations at Kremlin Palace of Congress, Tchaikovsky Hall, Moscow, Moscow Opera followed by tour of the USSR)
- In Germany on the occasion of India's 50<sup>th</sup> year of Independence - 2000 at House of World Culture, Berlin followed by a tour of Germany
- Invited by BBC to present especially choreographed programmed at the Symphony Hall, Birmingham that was telecast on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1997, internationally for India's 50<sup>th</sup> Year of Independence
- At Sorbonne, Paris
- Inaugural transmission on Portuguese Colour Television
- International Dance festival, Vienna
- UNESCO, Paris
- United Nations, Geneva
- Musee Guimet, Paris
- Inauguration of Godrej Dance Academy, National Centre for the Performing Arts (NCPA), Mumbai.
- House of World Cultures, Berlin
- At World Trade Centre, Kuala Lumpur, in the presence of the King and Queen of Malaysia.
- Several times at Queen Elizabeth Hall, South Bank, London, U K
- Presentation of her choreographies at Opera de France at Lille in their annual festival 2011
- amongst several others

## Other programmes

She has performed in every Sabha in Chennai and has extensively traveled all over India performing in various important and prestigious festivals which include Festivals conducted by Sangeet Natak Akademi, the Apex body of Culture in India, the ITC Festivals, Tourism & Culture Festivals and festivals organised by leading cultural bodies in Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune, Trivandrum, Mysore, Bhubaneswar, Ahmedabad, Jaipur, Guwahati, Manipur, Sikkim and smaller cities and towns in all states of the country.

## Her travels abroad include

- Autumn Festival, Paris, 1975
- Festivals in - Australia, USA, UK, France, Belgium, Portugal, Germany, Sweden, Switzerland - several times from 1975 to 1986
- Atina Aprio, Cingoli and Montecassion Festivals in Italy, 1986
- Festivals in five cities in Malaysia & Singapore, 1986
- International Festival, Yugoslavia, 1986
- International Religious Conference-PAX CHRISTI in France, 1988
- International Dance Festival, Austria, 1990
- International Festival, Montelimar, France, 1990
- International Dance Festival, Leicester, U.K., 1991
- Africasia Festival, Nice, 1991
- International Dance Festival, Rouen, France, 1991
- International Dance Festival, Caen, France, 1991
- International Dance & Music Festival, Bahrain, 1991
- International Dance & Music Performing Arts Festival, Kuwait, 1993
- International Dance & Music Festival, Dubai, 1993
- International Dance & Music Festival, Sri Lanka 1993
- International Dance & Music Festival, South of France, 1994
- International Dance & Music Festival, Sri Lanka 1994
- International Dance & Music Festival, Ottawa, Canada, 1995
- International Evening of Music & Dance, Toulouse, sponsored by Air France, 1995
- For Bhavans International on Broadway, New York, 1995
- Festivals in 1996 & 1997 in Australia,
- Festivals in the U K, France and Germany in 1998
- Festivals in Germany on the occasion of India's 50<sup>th</sup> year of Independence in 2000
- Festivals in England, Ireland, Japan, Australia and Middle East in 2000
- Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, Muscat, Qatar 2001
- USA 2002
- USA 2003

- Sri Lanka 2004
- UK 2005
- Allah Rakha Memorial at Queen Elizabeth Hall South Bank, London, UK 2006
- USA 2007
- Singapore 2011
- Srilanka 2011
- France 2011
- Srilanka 2012
- France 2013
- Germany 2013
- Luxembourg 2013
- Australia 2014
- Malaysia 2014
- Singapore 2014
- Sri Lanka 2014
- UK 2016
- USA 2016

## Conferences and seminars

- Convener of Sri Krishna Gana Sabha's (Chennai) Natya Kala Conference in 1996 & 1997
- Has co-convended Natya Darshan a dance seminar for Karthik Fine Arts in 2002 & 2003 along with Prof Sudharani Raghupathy and now serves the seminar in an advisory capacity.
- Continues to be cultural advisor to Natya Darshan, dance seminar for Karthik Fine Arts.

## Some important papers / lectures / lecture demonstrations presented in India

- Indian Fine arts Society, Chennai
- Tamizh Isai Sangam
- Morning Pannaaraaichi sessions (expert sessions)
  - On Koothu
  - On Devaki Pulambal, of Kulashekhara Aalwar – a special production was also mounted based on this hitherto untouched pasuram in the Bharatanatyam repertoire
  - Natyarangam: Melody and mysticism of Jayadeva's ashtapadis; on Kavuthuvams; on Aharya
- Research paper on works of Sri Purandara Dasar
- Seminar conducted by "Praseeda", Bangalore

- Topics viz. Kavuthuvams, Dance – an interdisciplinary activity, Rasa theory and other subjects for Sri Krishna Gana Sabha's Natya Kala Conference
- Thillanas of Lalgudi Sri. G Jayaraman for Karthik Fine Arts, Chennai
- Heritage Seminar, Bangalore
- Paper on Padams and Javalis - for B V K Shastri memorial, Bangalore
- At the IIM - Bangalore - under the programme - "Tracking Creative Boundaries"
- Dance and Music for Dance at Chowdiah Memorial.
- For the I T C Management trainees
- Specially conceived lecture demonstration IIT Madras, IIT Kharagpur, IIT Poovai and several colleges and educational institutions all over India.
- University of Guwahati
- Madras Music Academy
- Government Music College, Tamil Nadu
- Then and Now Seminar, Kolkata
- Presented a paper on Images for Sarojini Naidu School for Performing Arts, Visual Arts & Communication
- Spicmacay India since 1985.

## Workshops in India

- Natya Institute of Choreography, Bangalore
- Workshop organised by Nrittakshetra and Aurobindo Ashram, Kolkata
- Jawaharlal Nehru Manipur Dance Academy, Imphal
- Workshop organised by Akademi Mondiale and Aurobindo Ashram, Kolkata
- Rajya Sangeet Akademi, Kolkata
- Workshop in residence at NCPA, Mumbai
- Workshop for Rajiv Gandhi Centre for Youth Development
- Bangalore, 1988
- National Centre for the Performing Arts, Bombay, 1989

## Some important papers / lectures / lecture demonstrations presented abroad

- At the University of Frankfurt, Germany
- Rotary International
- University of Seattle, Washington - Spicmacay USA
- Carnegie Mellon University, Spicmacay USA
- UCLA (University of California at Los Angeles) Spicmacay USA
- Stanford University, Spicmacay USA
- Rutgers University, Spicmacay USA
- Japan Foundation, Tokyo
- Nehru Center, London

- Nehru Center, Jakarta Indonesia
- Australia
- Singapore
- Malaysia

**Besides regular workshops Chitra Visweswaran has conducted special workshops for professional dancers and dance teachers abroad:**

- Frankfurt, 1981
- University of California at Los Angeles, 1983
- Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London 1987 & 1988
- Academy of Indian Dance, U.K, 1990
- Berlin, 1990
- Hofheim , Germany, 1991
- Berlin, Germany, 1991
- Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London, 1992
- The United Kingdom, 1992 & 1993
- Middle East, 1993
- Sri Lanka, 1993 & 1994
- U.S.A, 1995
- Paris, 1995
- Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London 1996
- Sydney, Australia, 1996
- Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, London, 1997
- University of Frankfurt, Germany, 1998
- Arnsberg, Germany, 1998
- Berlin, Germany, 1998
- U.S.A, 1999
- England, Ireland, Japan Foundation, Australia and Middle East in 2000
- USA 2002
- USA 2003
- Sri Lanka 2004
- UK 2005
- North Western University, Chicago 2007
- Opera de France at Lille
- USA - Seattle and Austin during Meera - the soul divine tour

**Amongst several others**

- Her performances have been archived by Sangeet Natak Akademi, New Delhi and NCPA, Mumbai
- Her dance has been recorded and telecast by important television channels around the world including like BBC, Singapore Broadcasting company,

Sydney Television, French Television, Portuguese Television, Roopavahini - Srilanka & Doordarshan, India

- Her Video recordings are housed in Universities all over the World
- Her recent teaching segment in the dance serial Thaka Dhimi Tha is considered a meaningful contribution and mind-opening exercise in the field of dance
- eParampara Infotainment have released two DVDs featuring past performances of Smt. Chitra Visweswaran

## Publications

- Natyakala Conference
- Natya Darshan
- "Bharatanatyam" - Book by Manjula Lusti Narasimhan
- NCPA Journal
- Annual journal of Bharat Kalachar
- Sruti Ranjani
- Shanmukha
- Tamizh Isai Sangam Journal

amongst several others

## Major Contribution – researched productions, Collaborations, revival of vanished dance items etc.

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- At thirteen, she choreographed the life of Saint Thyagaraja in the Varnam format as also started composing Jathi sollukattu.
- She is one of the first Bharatanatyam dancers to have composed her own jathi sollukattu and also the first dancer to have trained her students to do Nattuvangam.
- She was the first dancer to have started the concept of announcement on stage even when she was as young as 16, at Kolkata.
- Having trained in lighting and lighting design under the legendary Tapas Sen in Kolkata, she incorporated, as early as age 17, the concept of using lighting as an integral part of choreography and was one of the first Bharatanatyam dancers/ choreographers to do so.
- Productions conceived and researched by Chitra Visweswaran in collaboration with musician-composer Pandit. R Visweswaran and have brought out different thrusts, facets, rare compositions and pieces hitherto untouched in Bharatanatyam.

## Solo Thematic Presentations

Concept, research and choreography by Chitra Visweswaran, music by composed by Sri R Visweswaran and Other Composers:

- Krishnanjali (Lyrics: Purandara Dasar and Kulashekhara Aalwar)
- Purandara Krishnamritham (Lyrics: Purandaradasar)
- Sthree Shakthi (Lyrics: Valmiki Ramayana, Vyasa's Mahabharatha, Bharatiyar and Subadhrakumari Chauhan)
- Naveena Niruparana
- Sarasa Vasantham (Lyrics: Adi Shankara Bhagavath Pada, Kalidasa and Jayadeva)
- Shakti Prabhavam
- Sadaa Venkatesam Smarami
- Sivarpanam
- Om Sakthi
- Sapta Sapti
- Vishwam Vishnumayam
- Sri Arunachala Ramana
- Sri Venkatakavi Bhakti Manjari
- Gnanamruta Saagaram
- Krithis of Late Sri G N Balasubramanian
- Musical Trinity
- Nisseema

## Dance Drama / Dance theatre

- Devi Ashta Rasa Malika (Text: from Soundarya Lahari and other sources)
- Devaki Pulambal - (Text: Kulasekara Aalwar's pasurams)
- Dwarakanatham Bhaje - (Text: Aandal's pasurams and Meera's Poems - music specially composed in the two systems of music - Carnatic and Hindusthani by R Visweswaran)
- Akshayadhara - (Text: from multi sources, dealing with Ganga - viz a viz - mythology, history, literature, geography, biology, religion, sociology, agriculture)
- Jai Gange
- Maithreem Bhajatha (Text: from Adi Shankar Bhagavathpada, Vallathol, Tagore and A Zakir)
- Mary Magdalena (Text: Tamil Translation of Vallathol's "Stree")
- Panchali (Text: Bharathiyar's Panchali Sabadam)
- Dasavatharam (Text: Sri Ganapati Sactchidananda Swami)
- Nritya Srinkhala (assorted dances flexible in nature and includes exclusive researched pieces not done hitherto in dance)
- Pravaaha - (conceptualised as the journey of the soul on earth)

# Chitra Visweswaran

- Sneha I (based on human values) multi texts
- Sneha II (revolving around environmental issues)
- Sneha III (the success story of a child who is a cancer survivor)
- Sneha IV (based on Gandhiji's doctrines of Ahimsa, Harijan upliftment and selfless love towards ones country)
- Sneha V (based on the teachings of the Maha Swami of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peeta advocating peace and harmony)
- Agastiyar - (Text: Agastiya Ashtothram and other texts)
- Guru Mahima - (In Sanskrit and Tamil)
- Vilakkum Vilakku (Text: Smt Chitra Visweswaran in Tamil)
- Nirantharaha - based on the vision of Rabindranath Tagore in original and translation in Tamil
- Thiruneelakantar (music composed by Madurai Tsethuraman)
- Raghuvamsa Thilakam based on Swathi Thirunal's Kriti, Bhavayami Raghuramam)
- Ayothi Mannan (based on the Tamil translation of Swathi Thirunal's Kriti, Bhavayami Raghuramam)
- Shanmukha Vaibhavam - (In Tamil)
- Guru Arul (Based on the concept of Guru)
- Namachivaya Vazlha (Text from Teevaram and Tiruvembaavai)
- Abubuthi (Group choreographies in Margam format)
- Thirupugazl Maalai (Text Arunagirinathar's Thirupugazl)
- Sri Pothai Kuravanji (Lyric and Music Chitra Visweswaran)
- Annai Abhirami
- Natya Pravaaha
- Anubhuti Dwututan
- Meera - the Soul Divine, a landmark production in collaboration with Bombay Jayashri Ramnath
- The entire repertoire of Chitra Visweswaran and her Chidambaram Academy of Performing Arts has been researched and choreographed by Smt. Chitra Visweswaran.
- In addition, she has composed several anjalis, kavuthuvams (Nataraja Kavuthuvam, Kumbamuni Kavuthuvam and Ganga Kavuthuvam in Sanskrit) Thillana in Behag ragam, Adi thalam.
- 'Vilakkum Vilakku' (a dance production in Tamil) and poems in Hindi and choreographed all these in dance
- Lyrics and music of Sri Pothai Kuravanji

## Collaborations with

- Guru Kelucharan Mahapatra, and Smt. Kumkum Mohanty in a production - 'Maithreem Bhajatha'
- Smt. Sonal Mansingh

# Chitra Visweswaran

- Smt. Sanjukta Panigrahi based on Rabindra Sangeet
- Dr Malabika Mithra
- Prof. Sudharani Ragupathi and Dr Padma Subrahmanyam in "Viralimalai Kuravanji"
- Lalgudi Sri Jayaraman – At Mrs. Chitra Visweswaran's request, Lalgudi Sri G. Jayaraman set excerpts from Valmiki Ramayanam to Saptha Soolathi Thala in Saptha ragas especially for the ITC's Swarna Sankhya festival. The text for this was researched and edited by Smt Chitra Visweswaran.
- Lalgudi Sri G Jayaraman specially composed a varnam on Venkatachalapathi in Shanmukhapriya ragam, Adi talam, (Devar munivar) and a varnam based on the eight rasas of Devi as expounded in Soundarya Lahari in ragamalika, Adi talam ( Angayarkanni) at Smt Chitra Visweswaran's request.
- Vidwan Sri Madurai N Krishnan specially composed two Varnams at her request, in Kalyani ragam and Adi talam, in Bhairavi ragam and Adi talam and a Thillana in Revathy ragam and Adi talam. Sri. T.N. Seshagopalan
- Bombay Jayashri Ramnath who composed the music for Chitra Visweswaran's latest hallmark production, Meera- the Soul Divine.

A large part of her repertoire, especially the dance dramas/theatre /group productions, is a result of collaborative work between her and her multi-faceted musician, husband, Pandit R.Visweswaran, (nephew of G.N. Balasubramaniam) who was an adroit Santoor player, a Carnatic vocalist, composer, Vaineeeka, western classical guitarist, and a self-taught Flamenco guitarist.

## **She has researched & presented, at a point in time, when such work was almost unheard of**

- The historical development of Kavuthuvams, their place in society, contents, with emphasis on the revival of rare Kavuthuvams
- Rare Purandaradasa Krithis, Rare Swathi Thirunal Krithis
- Compositions of the Music Trinity hitherto untouched in dance
- Rare Oothukadu Venkada Subbiyer Krithis
- Rare Papanasam Sivan Krithis
- Poems and dance dramas of Tagore
- Revived and presented rare Pada Varnams
- Songs in Marathi, Bengali, Hindi and its dialects
- She is at present researching and working on rare Teevarams and rare Thirupugazl's (Ancient spiritual texts of the Tamil people) hitherto untouched in dance, towards extension of Bharatanatyam repertoire.
- In addition to being Managing Trustee of Chidambaram Academy of Performing Arts, Chitra Visweswaran is also **Dean of Lalitha Kala Mandir, the fine arts wing of Sri Muthukrishna Swami Mission**

wherein, through its outreach program, classical dance and music training is imparted to the less affluent in non-metro areas.

- She is currently serving as **Member Secretary, Tamilnadu Iyal Isai Nataka Manram.**
- As State representative on the **General Council of Central Sangeet Natak Akademi**
- As Syndicate Member, Tamilnadu Music and Fine Arts University
- Is **Central Government nominee** on Governing Board, **Kalakshetra Foundation.**
- **Expert Committee Member, ICCR**

## **President - ABhai-Association of Bharatanatyam Artistes of India Has also served on the following Committees**

- Board Member of Sarojini Naidu School of Performing Arts, Visual Arts and Communication, University of Hyderabad.
- Has served as a board member, Kalakshetra Foundation.
- Is a board member, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Chennai.
- Has served as Trustee, India Foundation for the Arts, a Ford Foundation activated project.
- Member of the Committee constituted by the Government of India for selection of candidates for award of scholarships and fellowships in Bharatanatyam.
- Member of other committees relating to Art & Culture, constituted by the Government of India
- External Examiner in Bharatanatyam in many institutions / universities.
- Occupied Rabindranath Tagore Chair in Fine arts in a Professor Emeritus standing in the University of Madras.
- Has served as a Member of the General Council and Executive Board of the Central Sangeet Natak Akademi (The apex body of performing arts in India).
- Served on General Council and Executive Board of Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram.