



**CHAT CORNER** Only a few were successful in combining academic studies with pursuits like dance and music. Sudha Peethambaran, a post graduate in Zoology, belongs to this rare class of artistes.

*The burgeoning popularity of school and university youth festivals in the seventies and eighties of the last century had led to an unprecedented resurgence in the dance scenario in Kerala. But these mega festivals only produced 'competitors' and not 'performers'. That was mainly because the participants were after benefits like grace marks for pursuing higher studies. Only a few were successful in combining academic studies with pursuits like dance and music. Sudha Peethambaran, a post graduate in Zoology, belongs to this rare class of artistes. Sree Sankaracharya School of Dance, Kalady, of which she is the founder-director, has been assiduously striving to help young dancers to become performers through an ingenious pedagogy that has been widely applauded. As a choreographer, her productions have been praiseworthy as they addressed contemporary social issues and also popularised teachings of social and spiritual reformers like Sankaracharya and Sree Narayana Guru. In this connection, the two mega productions, 'Sankaram Loka Sankaram' and 'Gurudeva Charitam' are worth mentioning. Dance festivals apart, encomiums and titles conferred on both up-and-coming talents and also veterans have fetched national recognition to the institution. Excerpts from an interview with Sudha...*

### **Upbringing**

My native place is Fort Kochi. My father was a connoisseur of classical art forms and he was a source of inspiration for my dance pursuits. From the age of five, I began learning classical dance from Kalamandalam Mohana Thulasi. He laid a strong foundation as a result of which I won prizes at the district-level competitions in the school and later at the Mahatma Gandhi University youth festival. Later, I did my specialisation in Mohiniyattom under Kalamandalam Kshemavathy. Numerous performances under her keen eyes emboldened me. Even now, I continue to be her student.

### **Turning point**

It was but natural that I chose the profession of a college lecturer, as I had a fairly good academic track record. Moreover, my parents also had the same desire. But marriage proved a turning point. My husband, Peethambaran, a professor of Commerce in Sree Sankara College, Kalady, was very particular that I pursue learning and teaching of

dance. In January 1993 we got married and in May the same year we opened the school only because of him. Even today he continues as the promoter of the institution.

### **The school**

We had a modest beginning with 20 students. Today the number has crossed 1,000, in 11 centres situated in and around Kalady. Although it was an intricate job to conduct the classes alone in the beginning, as the years rolled on, our students themselves were employed as teachers. Interestingly, all of them have to their credit an excellent academic background as well. I have to specially mention the services of C.P. Unnikrishnan, technical director of the school from the beginning. Apart from being a trained Kathakali artiste, Unnikrishnan sir is an acclaimed authority on Natya Shastra and classical performing arts. The theory classes are mainly engaged by him.

### **Numerous schemes**

Classes in theory and practical apart, we organise lecture-demonstrations, workshops and seminars led by veterans almost regularly. Padma Subramaniam, Vasundhara Doraiswamy, Dhananjayan and Shanta Dhananjayan, N.V. Krishnan, Sridhar and Anuradha Sridhar are some of the renowned artistes from whom our students have benefitted through classes, performances and interactions. Ten years ago, we introduced a unique scheme of giving accreditation certificates to young dancers on the basis of their performance in theory, practical and viva voce. The practical examination demands performance in a kutcheri format, in addition to an introduction to each item, both in Malayalam and English. Successful artistes are given the Sree Sankaracharya Award for Young Dancers. Over the past 10 years, 30 students have received the award and most of them are regular invitees at dance festivals both inside and outside Kerala.

### **Festivals, awards**

Sree Sankaracharya National Festival of Dance and Music, which we organise biennially, has turned out to be a major attraction for outstanding dancers and musicians across the country. 'Choreo Fest' was introduced in 2007 in which productions highlighting social issues such as environment, corruption and terrorism are staged. 'Loka Samastha Sukhino Bhavanthu', which was on terrorism, was staged in three African countries.

### **As a performer**

I am an A Grade artiste of Doordarshan and continue to perform at many festivals, including those organised by Sangeetha Nataka Akademi and Department of Tourism.