

# **(BIOGRAPHY)**

## **RUKMINI DEVI ARUNDALE**

Born: Rukmani Neelakanta Sastri, 29 February 1904 Madurai, India

Died: 4 February 1986 (Aged 81) Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India

Years Active: 1920-1986

Spouse: George Arundale (m. 1920)

Awards: \* Padma Bhushan (1956)

Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship (1967)

Political Role: Member of Parliament, Rajya Sabha.

She was the first woman in Indian history to be nominated as a member of the Rajya Sabha, the upper house of the Parliament of India.

Cultural Revival and Bharatanatyam

Rukmini Devi Arundale emerged as the foremost figure in the revival of Bharatanatyam, transforming it from the temple-based sadhir tradition of the Devadasis into a respected classical art form. Despite criticism and resistance in the early decades of the twentieth century, she performed with quiet courage, restoring dignity to an art form on the brink of rejection. Her vision extended beyond dance alone, encompassing the revival of India's traditional arts and crafts. Through her life's work, she reshaped cultural attitudes and left an enduring imprint on India's artistic conscience. In recognition of her lasting influence, she was later honoured among the hundred individuals who shaped modern India, and received prestigious national awards for her contribution to the arts.

Early Influences and Kalakshetra

Deeply shaped by the ideals of the Theosophical Movement and inspired by the guidance of Dr Annie Besant, Neelakanta Shastri chose to settle in Adyar, Chennai after his retirement. There, close to the headquarters of the Theosophical Society, he built a home that would become a quiet centre of intellectual and spiritual exchange. It was in this environment that the young Rukmini encountered not only the principles of theosophy, but also fresh and transformative ideas about culture, theatre, music, and dance.

Her life took a decisive turn when she met Dr George Arundale, a distinguished British theosophist, a close associate of Annie Besant, and later the Principal of the Central Hindu College in Varanasi. This meeting marked the beginning of a deep and enduring bond that would shape her personal and artistic journey.

In January 1936, she along with her husband, established Kalakshetra, an academy of dance and music, built around the ancient Indian Gurukul system, at Adyar, at Chennai.

#### Redefining the Art Form

For centuries, Bharatanatyam was known as sadhir, a name rooted in its temple and courtly past. The dance came to be known by its present identity through the vision and dedication of E. Krishna Iyer and Rukmini Devi Arundale. Together, they played a decisive role in reshaping the form—particularly refining the Pandanallur style—so that it could speak to a wider world.

In this process of renewal, elements of excessive Śṛṅgāra and overt eroticism, inherited from its association with the Devadasi tradition, were consciously set aside. What emerged was a redefined classical art, disciplined in form and elevated in spirit, capable of commanding both national respect and global recognition.

#### Advocacy and Humanitarian Work

Guided by a deep compassion for all living beings, she devoted herself to the cause of animal welfare and aligned with numerous humanitarian organisations. During her tenure as a member of the Rajya Sabha, she played a pivotal role in shaping progressive legislation that led to the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act. Her commitment did not end with the law itself; in 1962, she went on to establish the Animal Welfare Board of India, serving as its first chairperson and giving institutional form to her lifelong ethic of care and protection.

In 1977, she was twice offered nomination for the office of the President of India by Prime Minister Morarji Desai—an honour she chose, with quiet resolve, to decline.

#### Legacy of Craft and Heritage

The following year witnessed another of her enduring contributions: the establishment of the Kalamkari Centre at Kalakshetra, envisioned to revive the ancient tradition of textile printing. Encouraged by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, she also fostered the practice of natural dyeing and handloom weaving within the institution, reaffirming her commitment to India's craft heritage.

Her life came to a close on 24 February 1986, in Chennai, leaving behind a legacy woven into the cultural fabric of the nation.

**SILKY SUBALA**  
**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT**

**2023-27**

**230158**