

# Dancing Jagadamba

## Rukmini Devi and the World-Mother-Movement

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The prominent theosophist Rukmini Devi Arundale (1904–1986, RD), well known as the *reformer of Bharatanatyam* was assigned a second role by the theosophists: She should act as the *World-Mother*, pendant to the designated *messiah* Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986, JD). While the latter doubted his role after several incidents and finally refused to continue fulfilling it, RD implemented her idiosyncratic interpretation of an image of women, first influenced and propagated by the theosophists. This was later reflected both in her interpretation of the *Bharatanatyam* and in her representation of the ideal woman as expressed in *A Message of Beauty for Civilization*. This paper aims to highlight some lesser known theosophical and spiritual background stories of RDs *reformed Bharatanatyam*.<sup>1</sup>

In April 27, 1920, one of the numerous, almost *traditional* scandals in the history of the *Theosophical Society* (T.S.) *Adyar* occurred: Rukmini Devi (1904–1986, RD), the 16 year old daughter of Tamil Brahmin A. Nilakanta Sastry from the South Indian Thiruvisannelur in Tamil Nadu and his wife Seshammal Sastry, married the 41-year-old George Sydney Arundale (GSA) in Madras<sup>2</sup>. This casteless person of British origin worked for many years as the co-worker of the politician and president of the T.S., Annie

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1 This is a translated and revised version of the article “Jagadamba tanzt: Rukmini Devi und das World-Mother-Movement”, in: Stephan Koehn; Heike Moser (Eds.): *Frauenkörper/Frauenbilder. Inszenierungen des Weiblichen in den Gesellschaften Süd- und Ostasiens*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz 2013, 161–177.

2 Since these are events that took place before *Madras* was renamed to *Chennai*, I will use the old terms *Madras* and *Bombay* instead of *Mumbai* in this article.

Besant (1847–1933, AB) who had brought him to India in 1902. AB made him professor of history at *Central Hindu College*<sup>3</sup> in Benares and established with him and the famous Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) the *National University of India* in Madras in 1917. There he received his doctorate in 1918 and became dean of teacher training.

GSA was therefore a respected and wealthy man because of his office. However, although RD's father himself was a member of the T.S., and had brought his children into contact with the theosophy of Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891, HPB) at an early age<sup>4</sup>, this unsuitable marriage – despite the consent of RD's family – met with considerable resistance in the conservative *Brahmin* circles of Madras and ultimately led to GSA and his wife leaving Madras temporarily, first to Bombay – and travelling to Europe in 1924, since the reputation of T.S. Adyar had no need for further scandals.<sup>5</sup>

RD's access to music and the performing arts was as much a part of her cradle as the world views of HPB's theosophy: her mother, Srimati Se-

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3 The now *Benares Hindu University*, founded by AB et al. as *Central Hindu College*.

4 A.N. Shastry had already moved to Madras with his family in 1911 after his retirement and had become a member of the T.S., which also naturally affected the education of the children. RD had already worked as a young girl as secretary for AB, who became her great role model. During this time, her bond with GSA evolved. RD's elder brother Sri Ram, father of TS's president (1980–2013) Radha Burnier, became president of the T.S. in 1953 as successor of Curuppu-mullage Jinarajadasa.

5 The first major scandal is known as the *Coulomb Affair* (1884/85) with the subsequent *Hodgson Report* commissioned by the *Society for Psychical Research* (SPR). There, HPB was accused of fraud and forgery of *Mahatma*-letters. These led to her resignation from the office of Corresponding Secretary and caused massive damage to the reputation of T.S. Campbell 1980: 87ff. Several scandals also took place in connection with Charles Webster Leadbeater (CWL; 1847–1937), Anglican clergyman and co-founder of the *Liberal Catholic Church* (LCC; for details see footnote 15). CWL was confronted with the repeatedly expressed accusation of encouraging masturbation to young boys for preventing sexual thoughts from 1906 on, and had to withdraw from all public offices at first, but was rehabilitated by AB a short time later. Afterwards, in 1909, CWL gained new reputation as the *discoverer* of the young JD as Messiah. However, this was shaken again by a custody process and the increasing rejection by JD, which ended in 1915 with CWL's departure for Australia, where he was ordained bishop of the LCL in the same year. Cf. ibid.: 115ff.

shammal, came from a learned Brahmin family from Thiruvaiyaru, a centre of classical South Indian Carnatic music<sup>6</sup> and the place where the famous composer and Hindu saint Tyagaraja (1767–1847) worked. Through them, the experiences of her childhood were passed on to her children.<sup>7</sup> Thus the cosmopolitan and liberal worldview of the predominantly European theosophists found its way into the life of the young Brahmin lady and was paired with a self-evident and natural familiarity with music and dance from childhood. Her marriage to GSA indeed overused the tolerance of the Brahmin elites, but at the same time created her *distant view* of their own culture, and this produced – as its most prominent outcome – the new styled *Bharatanatyam* (skt. *Bharatas dance*) as a phenomenon, that today presents itself to the western world as a *typical Indian product*. With RD's redefinition of an ancient tradition that she could never have practiced before as a Brahmin daughter – as she was the first Brahmin who danced herself and, moreover, employed *devadāsis*, temple dancers with a dubious reputation, as dance teachers<sup>8</sup> – a new, comprehensive, aesthetic view of femininity went hand in hand. This however, she connects in her later career with what she calls *Philosophy of Beauty* in lectures and as concrete representational implementation in dance and other areas of life such as her commitment to the vegetarianism of the world. The history of this concept of femininity influenced by theosophy will be presented in the following, with focus on RD's role as *World-Mother*<sup>9</sup>, attributed to her by her mentor AB.<sup>10</sup>

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6 The term *Carnatic Music* (skt. [Sanskrit] *Karnataka Samgita*) means the classical music of Southern India (i.e. the present federal states Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala and Tamil Nadu), in contrast to the Persian-Arab influenced *Hindustani Music* of the North. Singing is of great importance here, an ensemble normally consists of a singer, melodic (mostly violin) and rhythmic (*mridangam*, percussion instrument) accompaniment, as well as the *tambura* or *tanpura*, a long-necked string instrument that is used as a drone instrument.

7 For more details, see the introduction to Ross 2009.

8 Cf. Allen 1997: 64 with footnote 4 and the reference to a certain Mrs. Kumbakonam Balachandra who, according to the cultural historian Theodore Baskaran, had possibly performed as a Bharatanatyam dancer one year before RD.

9 For this particular aspect of the *World-Mother* with comprehensive references, see Ross 2009.

10 The *Reformation of Bharatanatyam* has been addressed many times from the most different perspectives – cf. e.g. B. the contributions of numerous authors with literature in Part III of Meduri 2005, as well as the contributions of Meduri,

## THE WORLD-MOTHER AND HER FAMILY

During the years 1924/25, RD and her husband were travelling around the world – not least of all for security reasons – and dedicated themselves to the founding of the *Young Theosophist Movement* (YTM), of which RD soon became president. This task seemed at first to be the ideal area of activity for RD, the future *World-Mother*, who AB had chosen. While Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895–1986, JD) achieved world fame in his role as a future Messiah and spiritual teacher, which he did not want to play anymore after a short time, it is probably a generally less well-known fact that other members of the T.S. who were also certified with similar tasks or at least with the potential to take on a spiritual task. Thus in 1925 AB, at a congress of the *Order of the Star of the East* (OSE) in Ommen, Netherlands, which had been founded to prepare the young JK for his role as a future Messiah or *Buddha Maitreya*<sup>11</sup>, named several persons as *Arhats*<sup>12</sup>, full beings who were to assume certain spiritual and divine tasks:

And now I have to give you, by command of the King, His message, and some of the messages of the Lord Maitreya and His great Brothers what I am saying, as to matter of announcement, is definitely at the command of the King whom I serve. His taking possession of His chosen vehicle ... will be soon. Then He will choose, as before, His twelve apostles ... and their chief, the Lord Himself. He has already chosen them, but I have only the command to mention seven who have reached the stage of Arhatship. Who were the "Arhats"? The first two (Mrs. Besant continued), my brother Charles Leadbeater and myself, ... C. Jinarajadasa, ... George Arundale, Oscar Kollerstrom, ... Rukmini Arundale, [...].

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O’Shea and Kersenboom in Viswanathan Peterson; Soneji 2008 – and therefore only as far as absolutely necessary subject of this investigation. For the feminist aspect, see Stiehl 2004.

- 11 *Maitreya* (~ from skt. *Mitra* “friend”) is regarded in almost all Buddhist traditions as Buddha of the future and future world teacher, whose arrival is announced for 3.000 to 30.000 years after the “historical” Buddha *Shakyamuni*.
- 12 The religious title *Arhat* is commonly used in Buddhism for a person, who has overcome the *three root kleshas* of *moha* (delusion, confusion), *raga* (greed, sensual attachment), and *dvesha* (aversion, ill will), as well as the *ten mental fetters/bonds* (Pāli: *samyojanas*, e.g. existence, arrogance, excitement or ignorance) and is therefore not reborn after the achievement of *nirvana*. HPB’s *Theosophical Glossary* however emphasizes above all the *initiation of the Arhat into esoteric mysteries*.

While, in 1925, Rukmini Arundale, George Arundale's young wife, had reached the degree of "Arhat," by 1928 she was ready for promotion to the almost ineffable position of "World-Mother," embodying the power of "Durga and Lakshmi and Sarasvati" – aspects of the Hindu Trimurti "in its feminine manifestation".<sup>13</sup> [Emphasis in the original]<sup>14</sup>

The task assigned to the young RD as *World-Mother* and feminine aspect of the divine itself, which should embody all positive qualities of the feminine, as well as the fact that it was the former women's rights activist AB who considered this role so important that a young Indian woman should be chosen as her embodiment and ambassador of the divine, played a role which should not be underestimated with regard to the positive perception of women in India which the theosophists aspire to.

AB announced the *World-Mother-Movement* on 25 May 1928, at a time when the signs of JK's crisis were already accumulating, in a festive service of the *Liberal Catholic Church* (LCC)<sup>15</sup> in Adyar, and declared this day, which is celebrated in the Christian churches as *annunciation of the Virgin Mary*, now at the same time as *World-Mother-Day*:

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13 AB quotes and comments from: Anonym: *The Theosophical Movement*, 1951: 292f. (Original article in *The Theosophist*, June 1928).

14 In Hinduism, the goddesses mentioned are individual aspects of the *Devī* (goddess), which is considered the creative power of the absolute (*brahman*) and mother of the universe. The first written proof of this concept can be found in the so-called *devī māhātmyam* from the sixth century AD. While *Durgā* (skt., lit. "the hard-to-reach") represents the terrible aspect of the goddess and is not assigned to a male deity, *Lakṣmī* (skt., lit. "joy") embodies happiness, beauty and wealth and is regarded as the female power (*shakti*) of *Vishnu*. *Sarasvatī* (skt., lit. "the flowing one") stands for erudition and wisdom and is the *shakti* of the god *Brahmā*.

15 The *Liberal Catholic Church* (LCC) was founded in 1916 by the theosophists James Ingall Wedgwood (JIW, 1883–1951) and the already mentioned CWL. In its theology, this Christian church was strongly influenced by theosophy. Formally, it was an affiliate organization of T.S. Adyar. JIW was formerly an ordained priest of the *Old Catholic Church of England*, the renaming of its reformed branch into *Liberal Catholic Church* took place in London in 1918.

Mrs. Besant gives “the accepted Invocation to the World-Mother:”  
“We bow in homage and adoration  
To the mighty and glorious Hierarchy,  
The Inner Government of the world;  
And to Its exquisite Jewel,  
The Star of the Sea,  
The World-Mother.”<sup>16</sup>

However, the *World-Mother* movement was also intended as female counterpart to the *Order of the Star in the East* (OSE)<sup>17</sup>, in which JK was assigned as the embodiment of the male part of the divine, the ideal world ruler. The *World-Mother* should now represent the female side of the divine, as she was known in the West as *Mary, mother of Jesus Christ*, but also the *Egyptian Isis* and thus the ideal woman herself. The meaning of the mother, which RD should now give weight to, was however only one aspect of the *Jagadamba*<sup>18</sup> and also had a political side desired by Besant and other theosophists, which should underline the increasing importance of women in the public life of India and emphasize their importance:<sup>19</sup>

When the World-Mother<sup>20</sup> spoke to me, and spoke of “our blessed Lord” now in the world, it was a glad surprise, and linked together, as with a gold-

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16 Quoted from Tillett 1986: 763.

17 The OSE, a theosophical organization, was based at *Varanasi*, India, and existed from 1911 to 1927, in order to prepare the world for JK as spiritual teacher for the world, or the future *Buddha Maitreya*. Its precursor was the *Order of the Rising Sun* (1910–1911), and it was succeeded by the *Order of the Star* (1927–1929, based at Ommen, the Netherlands). The (Theosophical) origin of the idea of a messiah is a passage from HPB’s outlook on the future of the T.S. in Blavatsky 1889: 307: “[...] besides a large and accessible literature ready to men’s hands, the next impulse will find a numerous and united body of people ready to welcome the new torch-bearer of Truth. He will find the minds of men prepared for his message, a language ready for him in which to clothe the new truths he brings, an organization awaiting his arrival, which will remove the merely mechanical, material obstacles and difficulties from his path. Think how much one, to whom such an opportunity is given, could accomplish.”

18 *Jagadamba* (also *jagadmata*, skt., lit. “world-mother”) is mainly used for the goddesses *Durga* and *Lakshmi*. See footnote 14.

19 Cf. Dixon 2001: 206.

20 Bishop CWL named the *World-Mother* with her Indian name as *Lakshmi Devi*, who had long before designated RD as her representative on earth. Cf. Tillett

en clasp, the Kingdom of Happiness proclaimed by our Krishnaji, and the all-embracing Compassion of the Divine Motherhood [...].

[...] Shrimati Rukmini Devi has been chosen to lead the movement for the uplift of Motherhood to its rightful place in the Life of the Nation. It is fitting that for this movement, as for that which is the mission of Him whom the World-Mother calls “our blessed Lord,” an Indian body should be chosen.<sup>21</sup>

However, the last paragraph shows that despite the emphasis on the importance of the feminine, a strict subordination to the world ruler is intended. The Bishop of the LCC, CWL, held this view above all, and so he was the one who in a letter to GSA made it clear that RD only had to *represent* the *World-Mother*<sup>22</sup> and was under no circumstances to *identify* with her, let alone to put her on an equal footing with the world ruler:

There is undoubtedly a tendency among some enthusiasts to confuse Rukmini with the World-Mother, and both of them with Parvati. Now Parvati, Lakshmi and Sarasvati are certainly Shaktis of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity – really Feminine Aspects of Them; [...] She does not stand at the level of the Bodhisattva, nor has she ever claimed to do so; [...]<sup>23</sup>

Since the foundation of the LCC, there had been repeated discourses within the T.S. on equal rights issues, such as the admission of women to the priesthood, and the question of their ability to become adepts. These were all judged negatively by the founders of the LCC, the bishops CWL and JIW with arguments which were borrowed from the occult physiology and the sacramental doctrine of the Anglican Church, and which saw the priesthood of women as sufficiently covered by their ability to become mothers, because only their lack leads the man to the compensation of occult forces,

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1986: 763. This could be traced back to the corresponding statements in HPB’s *Isis Unveiled* (Blavatsky 1877) which will be presented in the following.

- 21 AB quoted in: <http://blavatsky.net/Wisdomworld/additional/AFTERMATH-10-PartSeries/ArticleNumber5of10.html> (accessed 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019).
- 22 The *World-Mother*, of which we are talking here, stands for the superior principle of the goddess (*Devi*), which alone is at most identical with the independent *Durga* (see footnote 14), but by no means with *Parvati*. *Parvati*, *Lakshmi* and *Sarasvati* stand for the female energies (*shaktis*) of the Hindu “Trinity” *Brahma* (creator, to *Sarasvati*), *Vishnu* (sustainer, to *Lakshmi*), as well as *Shiva* (destroyer, to *Parvati*) wants to express the subordinate position of RD, which in his opinion is by no means to be understood as JK’s equal counterpart.
- 23 Letter from CWL to GSA, dated August 28, 1928; ed. by Ross 2009: 124f.

over which he consequently has autocracy. Indeed, during the presidency of AB, CWL was at least temporarily the one who represented the occult currents in the T.S., while AB devoted herself to political and humanitarian goals.<sup>24</sup> This was criticized accordingly by the proponents of the ordination of women, because it did not correspond to the *three objects of the T.S.* formulated by the founders of T.S., HPB, HSO and WQJ. The first and most prominent of these was the formation of the core of a universal fraternity without distinction based on race, sex or creed.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the world teacher himself, JK, was apparently not informed of his future *shakti* and only learned of her existence from the American press, which wanted to question him about his opinion of the *World-Mother-Movement*, whereupon he had made public his complete ignorance about it.<sup>26</sup> In this respect, he expresses himself with blatant contempt for this new experiment in a letter to his *discoverer* CWL, in which he also expresses his criticism of the naming of so-called apostles or *Arhats*:

I hear Amma [AB] has proclaimed Mrs. Arundale as the representative of the World-Mother etc. I hear also that I am dragged into it all. It is the work of George, with his messages, the outcome of his fertile brain. His machinations are innumerable. I do not want to be mixed up with any of these things. I am going to be clear of such complications. Only I wish Amma hadn't mixed me up with it, as she did in the affair of the so-called Apostles. I suppose you have been informed about it all. The World-Mother etc., and I suppose [hope] you do not mind my being frank with you. Life is strange. It is full of complications, and as I am free of it all, I do not want to be caught up once again in it.<sup>27</sup>

So RD did function as an ideal occupation (Indian & female) for the embodiment of an image of women propagated by the theosophists and based

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24 See Dixon 2001: 84ff.

25 For details Ross 2009: 1–9 and Dixon 2001: 84ff. This discussion has apparently not led to success, because in 2003 the ordination of women still led to considerable difficulties. It is now permitted in the International Association of LCL (LCLI [USA], founded after the first schism in 1941). The conflict had been addressed again in 2003. For further differences, see the official website of the LCC: <http://web.archive.org/web/20070718123149/http://www.liberalcatholic.org/history/lcci/6-growingpains.asp> (accessed 14<sup>th</sup> March 2019).

26 Ross 2009: 78f.

27 Letter from JK to CWL dated May 4, 1928, quoted from Ross 2009: 76f.

on India's own tradition. This was not only compatible with India's self-image, but did also intend to modify the Western image of women with a modern idea of it, which at the same time retroactively represented the ideal of a new, equal woman, whose greatest and most positive potential was, however, motherhood.

There might be some suspicion that the propagation of the *World-Mother-Movement* at this very time might have served as a replacement for JK and the *Order of the Star of the East*, which were increasingly no longer politically viable.

## THE WORLD-MOTHER AND HER NUNS

This concept, now defined by the theosophists as *World-Mother*, was inspired by a tradition that experienced its highest form in India in *Shaktism*, but whose roots are most probably already to be found in prehistoric models. The *devi* or *shakti* represents the *divine mother* as the feminine aspect, as the dynamic, formative power of the *male absolute*, which is mostly embodied by *Shiva*.<sup>28</sup> Much later, in RD's new conception of *Bharatanatyam*, he is prominent as *Shiva Nataraja*, the king of dance.<sup>29</sup>

With the nomination of RD by the theosophists, the *World-Mother* has now been redesigned for a second time: This concept was by no means a new subject of HPB's theosophy since the founding of the LCC: Already in *Isis Unveiled* (1877), years before the resettlement to India of the T.S., founded in New York in 1875, HPB herself had dealt with the image of the *Virgin Mary* in a criticism of the *Roman Catholic Church*. Her manifestations, responsibilities and subordinates she equated with the goddesses of ancient Egypt and of Hinduism.<sup>30</sup> In doing so, she particularly deals with a special form of female existence, which would later play a key role in RD's most popular activity: The redefinition of the Indian temple dance *sadir* as *Bharatanatyam* and the rehabilitation of her disreputable actors, the *devadāsīs*. These she then described as the "chaste nuns of the goddess in

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28 Detailed information can be found, for example, in Hawley; Wulff 1996 and Kinsley 1988.

29 This is also interesting insofar as HPB himself had repeatedly described *Krishna as the counterpart to Jesus and Buddha*.

30 See Blavatsky 1877: 2009.

earlier days". Moreover, this new image is partly similar to the image that RD herself later drew of the reputation of Indian women at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and whose original nature she sought to grasp and revive, far more than the designs of the next generation:

If the Virgin Mary has her nuns, who are consecrated to her and bound to live in chastity, so had Isis her nuns in Egypt, as Vesta had hers at Rome, and the Hindu Nari, "mother of the world" hers. The virgins consecrated to her cultus – the Devadasi of the temples, who were the nuns of the days of old – lived in great chastity, and were objects of the most extraordinary veneration, as the holy women of the goddess. Would the missionaries and some travelers reproachfully point to the modern Devadasis, or Nautch-girls? [...].<sup>31</sup>

*The Mother of the World*, of whom HPB speaks, is not only concretely identified as the goddess Lakshmi, the female counterpart of Vishnu, the preserver and rescuer of the world. She represents fertility and motherhood, but embodies explicitly beauty:

Lakmy, or Lakshmi, the passive or feminine counterpart of Vishnu, the creator and the preserver, is also called Ada Maya. She is the "Mother of the World," Damatri, the Venus Aphrodite of the Greeks: also Isis and Eve. While Venus is born from the sea-foam, Lakmy springs out from the water at the churning of the sea; when born, she is so beautiful that all the gods fall in love with her.<sup>32</sup>

It is interesting too, that Krishna, the Avatar of Vishnu, who is regarded as the equivalent of Jesus Christ, as well as of Gautama Buddha, is always called Christna:

The early Christian Church, all imbued with Asiatic philosophy, evidently shared the same belief [...]. They had only to turn to the **Bagavedgitta** to

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31 Blavatsky 1877: 2010. The *Nautch-Girls* (anglicized form of *nāc*, probably from skt. *Nṛitya*, via Prakrit *Nachcha* simply a term for dance), of which HPB speaks, were popular as dancers especially during the Moghul period (16<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century) and also enjoyed great popularity among the officials of British Raj. However, the term was also misleading for the *devadāsis*, the temple dancers of southern India who were "married" to the deity of the temple. The popularity of the romanticized *Nautch girls* is illustrated by the fact that a comic opera *The Nautch Girl*, or, *The Rajah of Chutneypore* based on a model by George Dance and Frank Desprez with music by Edward Solomon was premiered and performed 200 times at the Savoy Theatre in London in 1891. See Rollins; Witts 1962.

32 Blavatsky 1877: 2060.

find Christna or Bhagaved saying to Arjuna: “He who follows me is saved by wisdom and even by works. ... As often as virtue declines in the world, I make myself manifest to save it.” [Emphasis in original]<sup>33</sup>

These considerations originate from HPB’s first major work *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and were written before the relocation of the headquarters of the T.S. to India. The events that took place in Adyar in the 1920s, starting with JK’s nomination as Messiah and later RD’s designation as *World-Mother*, were based on ideas that HPB had written down almost 50 years earlier. AB, GSA and CWL used these ideas for – not necessarily identical – political purposes and manifested them in the persons RD and JK. Whether they referred to HPB at any point would require a more detailed investigation. However, Ross mentions a pamphlet by Leonard Bosman titled *The World-Mother*<sup>34</sup>, which refers to a source of completely different content, whose origin he proves in HPB’s journal *Lucifer* (Jan., 1889). Here he refers to the article *A Vision produced by Music* in which a singer describes a vision in which Mary in a church has redeeming power on the crucified. A heavenly voice explains that he remains crucified until Mary returns. However, this has a more far-reaching, symbolic meaning:

[...] The partition between the two worlds can never be removed until [she] descends again into the living human heart, annulling its division and bringing to each the divine counterpart of which Maria is the eternal symbol. When she comes again – and I say the time is not long – the Crucification of Man shall be ended [...].<sup>35</sup>

This article was reprinted in 1928, this time in *The Theosophist* (June 1928). Here, however, AB additionally describes her own vision of Maria, who recently told her to announce the appearance of the *World-Mother* as “Coming of the Divine Compassion in its female aspect”. She then refers the liberation of the crucified man and the reunification with the male part concretely to the actual situation:

When the World-mother spoke to me of “our blessed Lord now in the world”, it was a glad surprise, and linked together as with a golden clasp, the kingdom of happiness proclaimed by our Krishnaji, and the all-embracing Compassion of the Divine Motherhood. Slowly will come this

33 Blavatsky 1877: 535.

34 See Ross 2009: 123f. The mentioned pamphlet is Bosman 1928.

35 Ross 2009: 124.

complementary work, calmly, serenely, the revelation of the true place of Woman in the coming civilization, not as the rival of men, but as his comrade, his friend.<sup>36</sup>

This statement clearly shows AB's ambitions to let the *World-Mother* speak for equal rights of the sexes just by stressing their difference. However, the tendency of an intentional transition from the autocracy of the world teacher to an equal partnership of male and female principle is noticeable too, however, without prior information and the agreement of her main actor, JK.

## RUKMINI DEVI'S POSITION

At the *Star Congress* in Ommen, the Netherlands in 1925, RD herself had the floor and defined her role very precisely: After initially presenting herself as *Arhat*, i.e. accepting this role, she immediately relativizes it by emphasizing the indiscriminateness between herself and the audience. Whether she herself was the author of this speech remains, of course, questionable:

If I stand before you as an Arhat, it is not, that you may feel any difference between us. [...] it is, that you may feel the nearness to me and to all, to the being of god himself [...].<sup>37</sup>

Immediately afterwards the focus is shifted and RD expresses her self-understanding as *representative of India and mediator between East and West*:

It is not only, that we may feel near to each other, it is also, that I may represent India, that I may bring to you something of the spirituality of India. I have been in Europe for some time and I feel it as part of my mission, to bring East and West together.<sup>38</sup>

Only then does she come to talk about the aspect of the *World-Mother* who, by definition, describes the *original Indian woman* who unites the beauties of India within herself. These are hardly visible to the Western world:

So I want you through my eyes be able to see the beautiful things of India, because anyone can see, what is not beautiful, what is ugly, what is untrue. We must see the beautiful things and you must realize, if you wish to under-

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36 Ross 2009: 124.

37 RD's Address at the Star Camp of the OSE in Ommen/Netherlands 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1925. See Arundale 1925: 246ff.

38 Ibid.

stand India, the woman as she was in ancient India, not as she is today; the woman, who was the warrior, the true mother, the priestess, the ideal for the world. She must live again and she **will** live again.<sup>39</sup> [Emphasis in original]

The last consequence is the identification of the mother with India itself. *Mother India* stands for the future *spiritual content*, which is to be united in a sense of symbiosis with the *form* represented by Europe:

India, I feel, will be the mother of the world as regards spirituality. Europe and the world will build the forms, the beautiful forms, they will be the cup and the spirituality of India will be the wine.<sup>40</sup>

The short text concludes with a reference to the future Buddha Maitreya and the prophecy that, with the return of Krishna, all that is true, good and beautiful will come back to India, and all that is ugly will be wiped out and India as the sun of the world will bring the light to the earth. For JK, who, as mentioned above, initially had no idea of the *World-Mother-Movement* as his ‘counterpart’, the prophecy was only partially fulfilled: In 1929, the doubting young man dissolved the OSE and left the T.S. one year later. However, his teaching that the path to truth could not be followed through spiritual authorities and organizations, even without his own existence as a *T.S. controlled Messiah* – or perhaps *precisely because of that* – became a guide for many spiritual seekers and still is today.

Indeed RD admits in an interview in 1971 that she had never identified herself with her role, but had merely made her abilities available for this purpose:

People were disappointed in me, because I did not claim to be the World-Mother or an Arhat, or anything in fact. I have revelations and could be more spiritual than I try to appear. I do not like to talk about these deep things within me. One has to be very careful not to personalize one’s experiences. [...].<sup>41</sup>

Dixon mentions another interview with Gregory Tillet from the same year, in which RD even modifies her position to that extent, that she has always understood her work in the service of art and humanity.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Interview with RD on April 1, 1973. For complete citation, see foreword by Ross 2009: xiii.

42 Cf. Dixon 2001: 206.

On the other hand – probably at the time of her introduction into her future office – she herself writes an instruction for the organization of the movement, in which she deals with educational methods for young people, as well as their contents, but also with strategies for the worldwide spread of movement:

Representatives should be chosen for each country who are approved by the World-Mother, and it is very important, that we should not proceed too quickly with the organization until we have reliable leaders who themselves fully appreciate the nature of their duties. Let the organization grow naturally, and the members of it grow with it.<sup>43</sup>

This suggests that RD approached her task with great seriousness and sought a way to organize the duties she associated with it. Whether the idea for this came from herself is however questionable. If one were to measure it by the fruits of its activities, which have arisen from this self-understanding, then at least a great self-identification with the role imposed on it can be assumed. Incidentally, the own experience of physical motherhood was not given to Rukmini DEVI.

## END AND BEGINNING

The *World-Mother-Movement* never attained the same significance as JK's OSE. However, JK himself left this order only a short time later, on August 3, 1929, also in Ommen, with that speech containing the famous sentence "I maintain that truth is a pathless land", in which he speaks out against the supremacy of any spiritual authority.<sup>44</sup> The Messiah of the theosophists' occult hierarchy thus left behind a *world-mother-widow*, who nevertheless

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43 Letter by RD s.a.e.l. from the archive of her employee and biographer Joseph Ross. Edited by Ross 2009: 128ff.

44 This so-called *Dissolution Speech*, held on August 3, 1929, the opening day of the annual *Star Camp* in Ommen, Netherlands. Original quote: "I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect. That is my point of view, and I adhere to that absolutely and unconditionally." For the complete quotation, see Krishnamurti 1929, at the website of the *Krishnamurti-Foundation*: URL: <http://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-krishnamurti/dissolution-speech.php> (accessed 12th march 2019).

continued to interpret her tasks in an unorthodox way and pragmatically, whereby the inspirations for this came again from various sources.

HPB and HSO had already advocated a revival of the *devadasi* tradition and the *sadir* with a view to its conservation. This was part of the *second object* of the T.S. as it meant ultimately the preservation of a religious tradition of India. They had initially received support from the elites, with whom they shared a concern in the fight against the decreed Christian morality. Even the early theosophists – in contrast to numerous reform movements – were concerned about preserving the dance of the *devadāsis*. Last but not least, however, in the form propagated by the theosophists, they were portrayed as pure, holy virgins who were supposed to develop particular spiritual abilities through *Natya Yoga*, the yoga of dance. This certainly required a *purifying reform* of the old temple dance and RD and the *Kalakshetra Academy*, which she founded together with her husband in 1936 and which is *Institute of National Importance* since 1994, represents this *purified dance*. Since then it has been allowed for young Brahmin daughters to learn from old *devadāsis* ...

In the years following until her death in 1986, RD developed endless activities in various fields and was one of the most prominent female members of the T.S. – if not of India – at all. Here are to be mentioned the schools she introduced in India after the visit of the reform pedagogue Maria Montessori, as well as her twofold appointment by President Rajendra Prasad to the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament, 1952 and 1956), in which she mainly committed herself to animal protection, vegetarianism and the establishment of the Indian National Park Programme. She finally obtained the nomination for state president in 1977, which she rejected. RD may have distanced herself from T.S. Adyar towards the end of her life, possibly for family reasons. But crucial for her creativity, remains an idea of femininity which, from a comparative perspective with Western women, is based on a clear *statement for an idealized Indian woman*. This she tried to realize as *Message of Beauty to Civilization*<sup>45</sup> as a bridge between the western and Indian world out of her own life story:

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45 Arundale s. a.: 16–17. The following quote is an excerpt from this text.

### **WOMAN'S PLACE IN THE WORLD**

The women of the West – I hope you do not mind my saying it – do not realize or understand what womanhood really is. They who think it is a matter of working in the world to earn one's own livelihood, to be independent, to go one's own way – to those all that is splendid. If only woman knew what her own way is! What is her independence for? What does she want her freedom for? What is her place? Is it merely to be a copy of a man? It is to be herself more than anything else, to be divine in her own being, to be a piece of art, not only an artist. For the true emotional spirit of art is one with the true emotional spirit of woman; and if these two can combine, whether in the home or in politics, whether, according to modern times, even at a typewriter, then woman can be her real self and can express herself through all the graces of life, the beauties and the refinements of life, and the influence she can bring upon her surroundings. And that influence must be entirely cultural, entirely refined.

RD's redefinition of ideal femininity in the ancient temple dance and of the identity of its actors, the *devadāsis* who were married to the gods, ultimately originated from their concept of HPB as pure servants of divine femininity itself. This – basically traditional – and eminently desirable definition of femininity, legitimized it for many young upper-class ladies of India to refine their self-expression by learning the old, new, divine dance by introducing it into dance academies in the following years. To this day, this ideal, not least as a dazzling element of Bollywood films and a popular *export article* is transported as symbol of feminine grace, playing strength and discipline, but always coupled with the *purity* of Indian women into the living rooms of the Indian and Western world.

### **ABBREVIATIONS OF THEOSOPHICAL NAMES AND TERMS**

- AB Annie Besant
- CWL Charles Webster Leadbeater
- GSA George Sydney Arundale
- HPB Helena Petrovna Blavatsky
- HSO Henry Steel Olcott
- JIW James Ingall Wedgwood
- JK Jiddu Krishnamurti

OSE Order of the Star in the East  
skt. Sanskrit  
T.S. Theosophical Society  
WQJ William Quan Judge

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46 The *Adyar Pamphlets* were published in the years 1911–1936 mostly as reprints of earlier articles. The quoted last number No. 212 may be published in 1936. At times 1904 is mentioned as the year of publication of this pamphlet, which is not possible since 1904 is the year of birth of RD, and the underlying speech was given on the occasion of the Star Congress 1929.

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