



Dancing in the Temple of Belur, Mysore State

RAM GOPAL

Rhythm in the Heavens

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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TO
My Gurus, and friends

INVOCATION

आङ्गिकं भुवनं यस्य वाचिकं सर्ववाङ्मयम् ।
आहार्यं चन्द्रतारादि तं नुमः सात्त्विकं शिवम् ॥

"To Whom the Whole World is the movement of His body, All Music is his Speech, Adorned with the Jewels of the Moon and Stars in His hair, deep in stilled meditation, To this Almighty Being Siva, I make my Obeisance"

*

"For the naked soul there is neither Occident nor Orient. These are only the garments. The world is his home. And his home, being of all, belongs to all."—*Romain Rolland*.

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Prologue

MY father once said to me: "Why do you dance?"
"I love to move, to leap, to float . . . well, just let the spirit seize me at the sound of drums or music," I replied immediately. "You call it dancing, Father, I call it rhythm."

That answer, given so long ago, in 'Torquay Castle', our old colonial house in Bangalore, South India, still seems to me the only valid reason for dancing. That my style of dancing is Hindu, the oldest known surviving technique, going back thousands of years, is perhaps not important; the fact remains, however, that this wonderful technique helps its disciples to express their emotions with great force, but a force that is always held in control.

In this book, as in my dance, I am sharing something with you, my audience and readers, and I hope that in this sharing you will sense something of the *rasas*, or sentiments, as we call them in India, of love, heroism, hatred, fear, disgust, peace, and all the other facets that have influenced both the good and the not so good in a life that ever reaches onward and upward through the Dance. As I dance I now attempt to write, and in writing, to create that first 'rhythm' that im-

pelled my feet and body and arms to rush wildly into a blinding thunderstorm and dance ecstatically and naked in that dangerous thunderstorm on a Monsoon afternoon long, long ago when I was a little boy. But of that episode more later.

During my travels I have been privileged to meet many of the greatest personalities of the East and the West. Had I not been a dancer, an artist, provoking the curiosity of a public, would I have met so many of the great? I wonder. There was Gandhi in my boyhood days in Bangalore, when he vacationed in Nandi Hills outside Bangalore; Tagore, that bearded, white sage of beauty and poetry; Ramana Maharishi of Arunachala, the sage of the twentieth century, whom millions of Hindus were lucky to have met; my dance Gurus, Meenakshisundaram Pillai and Kunju Kurup. Many more of the East also enriched my life in India, in Burma, Tibet and the Himalayas. But above them all stands the love and influence of my parents, whom in India we regard as gods. And quite rightly too, for they were godly in action, thought and love towards their family.

And the West? I love the West. I am happy to be 'Westernised' as some Indians childishly accuse me. Of course I am Westernised, bridging the gap between the East and the West. I am gloriously Westernised. Being Westernised completes for me the circle of East and West and consequently gives me the added knowledge and harmony of being a complete human being. What untold hours I have spent contemplating works of art in the matchless museums and galleries of Paris, London and New York, not to mention the Hague, Amsterdam and the Scandinavian countries. Could my guardian angels have chosen better instructors and teachers than Michel Larionov and Gontcharova to tell me first-hand of the glories of the ballet, décors, dancers, books, and to take me to watch so many classes in the style and technique of ballet in the classrooms of Kchesinska and Pre-

obrajenska and Volinine in Paris? And Mercedes De Acosta, of the burning eyes and pale face. Could I have found a more beautiful person and friend to initiate me into the mystery of the world of art and letters and their chosen personalities? Mercedes was to me a 'Lilac Fairy' from the *Sleeping Beauty*, bringing art into my life. She guided and formed so much in me who was ignorant of art and Life; I owe much to her. I met her at a party in the hilltop home of Bernadine Szold Fritz in Hollywood. From the outset I could not help feeling the power of her personal magnetism and I immediately came under the spell of her influence. Through her I came to realise our 'oneness with' humanity, instead of our 'separateness from' each other. The more readily mankind realises its 'oneness' the more quickly will the light shine within its heart. When that time finally comes, the "Supreme Intelligence which dances within the Soul" will reveal itself to us in that 'Rhythm in the Heavens' which we see above. I would like to quote from the essence of Ramana Maharishi's teaching, a passage which clarifies his philosophy in his own words:

"The body is insentient like an earthen pot, and to it there is not the 'I' sense. But we exist as the self-established *Atman*, even in deep sleep, where there is no body consciousness. Therefore 'I' is not the body. Who am 'I'? Whence am 'I'? In the hearts of those who, seeking thus with keen insight, stay in steadfast and tranquil abidance in the self, there shines forth God Realisation and Enlightenment, consciousness, self-luminous and perfect."

Here is an extract from a letter from another great sage, Sri Aurobindo, to a disciple:

"After all, for the greatest as for the smallest of us, our strength is not our own but given to us for the game that

has to be played, the work that we have to do. The strength may be formed in us, but its present formation is not final—neither formation of power, nor formation of weakness. At any moment the formation may change—at any moment one sees, especially under the pressure of Yoga, weakness changing into power, the incapable becoming capable, suddenly or slowly the instrumental consciousness rising to a new stature or developing its latent powers. Above us, within us, around us is the All-Strength and it is that that we have to rely on for our work, our development, our transforming change. If we proceed with faith in the work, in our instrumentality for the work, in the power that missions us, then in the very act of trial, of facing and surmounting difficulties and failures, the strength will come, and we shall find our capacity to contain as much as we need of the All-Strength of which we grow more and more perfect vessels.”

Here both Sri Aurobindo and Ramana Maharishi touch the dynamic ‘activity’ of Yoga, and not the ‘escapist’ refuge that so many in India and elsewhere believe the teachings of Yoga to be. It is Activity, stemming from a constructive contemplation and ‘communion’, that these great Masters, like those before them, found. And it is that which has constantly carried me forward through so many storms on the oft-times dark seas of life. If only more people could realise the strength and activating dynamism of Yoga, how much better equipped would they be to look failure, death and disappointment, in the face, and overcome these forces by inner realisation of the ‘Absolute Truth’ these masters found.

CHAPTER ONE

I Saw a God Dance

IT is one of those warm yet pallid Indian afternoons. There is a strange stillness everywhere. A dry leaf scrapes sleepily across the parched earth. The sky is changing from its vivid morning blue to a grey coat of afternoon mistiness, a sort of diffused lighting and there is that, for me, maddeningly exciting smell of distant wet earth. The winds carry this smell so quickly and it comes upon me with refreshing expectancy—a combination of musk and *kus-kus*, mingled with green grass and warm steam, floating on the wind from the rain beating down a few miles away in the fields and hills near where my home was. But my nostrils look for more of that wonderful nature-fresh perfume, and more of it is carried on the winds that now blow at more frequent intervals.

My mother's garden looks from time to time like a still water-colour fresco suspended over the earth, unreal. What a profusion of colour, yellow and red hibiscus, honeysuckle, flame of the forest *Gold Mohur*, that wonderful tree of fire-red blossoms and grey bark, like smoke. The lawns lie like jade, and lizards run from corner to corner; the four wonderful silver oaks seem to sigh, their trunks strongly rooted, their

tops swaying from side to side and I catch a glimpse of silver leaves, against this glow that the sky seems to give to everything. Far away I hear a rumble of thunder, distant, threatening and yet for me somehow promising. My blood tingles. I know it is going to rain, for it is the beginning of the monsoons. So at last I can escape from the guardianship of the servants. My stern and ever-watchful father is asleep taking his afternoon siesta; and my mother rests in her rooms after the busy activities of house and garden.

I am free, or think I am. Everybody, everything seems strangely quiet. A squirrel scurries across the jade green lawns, a train rumbles past. I move silently, too afraid to upset the storm gods, silently dreading, and yet fearfully, joyfully expecting a wonderful cannon ball thunderclap to send my blood reeling and give me the great thrill that thunderstorms have always given me, sending an inexplicable sensation of rhythm and movement that make my body feel like bursting unless I tear off my clothes and run into the very midst of that storm and become one with it.

How often that had happened in the past. And here are the same strange symptoms of another storm, only I hope it will be more violent and more elemental and that the thunder claps will grow wilder and more frequent, and those great lightning flashes will last a little longer, for I always knew they were followed by the most tremendous thunder claps. Yes, that instinct of mine is right. I look up, the sky is darkening and my worst hopes are to be confirmed, there is going to be a very heavy cloudburst. Far away I can hear herdsmen driving the cattle and goats quickly to the nearest shelter they can find. Now the tall silver oaks give warning that the winds are getting stronger, for I see how their silver tops blow and bend, the fringe of neem and banyan trees skirting our garden walls move and sway violently, I see a shower of rose petals fall from an arbour off the greenhouse.

My God, let it rain, fiercely, violently; let there be thunder and lightning, and let there be those wonderful rivers of muddy red earth making little lakes and streams all over our garden.

"*Sono baba, Sono baba*, where are you? Papa will be angry, you are not resting and reading your books. Please get back to your rest and books in your room." . . . I hear the familiar cry of Gulab, the grand old Rajput valet-friend-servant of the family. I do the obvious; I climb up a small tree, laden with fruit and thick protective leaves, a jack fruit tree. Gulab will not look there for me. He is bound to go and look in the pigeon-house or the poultry farm at the rear of the house, for that is where he has usually found me before. I must hide this time, for I do not want to miss this storm and I know it is going to scare me to death and frighten me into a veritable ecstasy. I don't answer, and I see Gulab walk away and around the bend of the large old house. The wind blows faster, I rock in my hide-out. One of the older garden squirrels brushes past me as he, too, perhaps seeks shelter; I am still, quiet, motionless. He turns and looks at me, his large eyes enquiring and his tail still; he moves on up and is lost in the tree. I feel something rough and slight on my leg. It is one of those large lizards, garden variety, on my right foot; he looks like one of the prehistoric monsters I have seen in the 'Books of Knowledge' from father's library and I feel like letting out a yell, but then Gulab or the gardener may hear and I will have to go inside and rest in bed and read a silly book.

The lizard to my great relief, moves off my leg, looks over his sharp fins like a miniature crocodile and disappears. One of my sisters comes out of the house towards the tree, following that path in the garden. I catch a glimpse of her and pray she will not seek me out. She calls out to the gardener and passes right under the low hanging branches on which I am

perched like one of those slender monkeys I see in the *Lal Bagh* zoo. Thank God she's moved off! But our dog, Lassie, follows her, sniffs around the bark of the tree and then looks up. She spies me and, being the sport she is, wags her tail and tells me she won't tell, and without barking, walks off in the wake of my sister. Looking up I get one fresh drop of rain right into my eye. Quickly the raindrops follow one another on the large green leaves of the jack tree above my head, sounding like a lot of little elves and birds scurrying on the roof-top of the trees. It is rain! The air now is thick with the incense of the grass and the earth and the strange odour of steam mingled with the sticky perfume of trees and flowers. Nobody can possibly come out of the house now, they wouldn't want to get wet. I must bathe in that rain and feel one with the trees and birds and flowers. I start to undress: off come my shirt and pants, I hide them, or try to, from the rain which is now coming down in sheets, amidst the largest leaves I can find in the rush of the storm.

Without a moment's warning there is the most blinding flash of lightning, followed ominously by a thunder clap so loud that the tree shakes. I remember stories vaguely told of the danger of being under a tree in the rain and of people being struck dead; in any case I feel so suddenly cold and frightened that I slip down, or fall off the low hanging branches and decide to make a dash for the portico. It is too late, again the lightning flashes, again the thunder roars. The rain is now a curtain of pure blinding crystal so that I can hardly see the old house.

Suddenly I feel warm, my feet itch and my body seems vitalised by some shock that touches within me some long-forgotten secret. I paddle madly in the little streams and wave my arms around, wildly delighted and happy. I seem to be possessed by some tremendous spirit and I cannot direct my own body or my own will into anything. I don't want to

anyway. I just tremble in glorious freedom and happiness to be alone, all alone in this wild and glorious storm. I catch far away, a vague glimpse of the top of the trees swaying violently, agitated and dancing, bending and touching each other, it seems to me, up in the clouds. There is mud and slush, fresh-smelling earth carrying leaves and petals of hibiscus and rose at my feet, and there is curtain after curtain of silver sheeted rain pouring with all God's might and glory on the parched, quiet, patient earth, and I am naked and happy and dancing, wildly happy and at one with some great force I feel, but do not seek to understand.

I stamp, jump, roll in the water and the mud, rise and am instantly cleansed; and then move around walking and running happily. And right in the midst of this wild cavorting I suddenly glance up at the sky. The large drops of rain beat into my eyes and make them smart, but this lasts only a second and I look up again and see in the blackness another flash, brighter than the last, hear an even more violent thunder clap, and suddenly remember what the Sanskrit professor working with my father every morning tells me. "When you see the lightning flash and hear the thunder drums up in the clouds and it rains, it is the God Siva dancing his *Tandava*, his dance of creation. If you look carefully you will see Indra riding his great white elephant *Iravata*, bearing the thunderbolt in his hands; everything in nature is God, look and you will see."

These thoughts of the words of the Sanskrit professor, a Brahmin scholar working with my father, come to my mind in a flash. Nothing matters now, for I am free and alone. Far up in the sky right in the midst of everything, I am caught up in this wild primordial dance of Nature, of Siva, of God himself, and in the wake of this rain and thunder and wind I am transfigured. Some force has entered within me to be forever hidden within my innermost depths. This I know, this I feel,

but cannot quite understand or explain to myself. But I don't bother. I feel a great surge of wild energy and I feel the God-surge within me, through me, with me in this rhapsody of rain and earth and green and thunderous noise, this madly whirling dance of nature in her monsoon mood.

Suddenly I hear a shout: "*Sono baba* come inside at once, your father is getting up." It is Gulab again. How I hate the thought of leaving all that wonderful fresh crystal clear bath of God and Nature, but how much more I fear looking into the angry eyes of my father and hear his deep voice reprove me for having risked catching cold! Impelled by fear of my father I slowly walk, start to go towards the great verandah; even the rain seems to have simmered down to less fury; as I walk, I catch the glint of sunlight coming quickly in patches and slipping off the leaves with the water into the wet red garden earth like silver. Unexpectedly I feel a rough grab on my shoulders. It is Gulab, who shakes me quickly out of my day-dreams. "If I tell Papa you know what will happen: you will get the cane, and you will cry and you will be made to stand for one hour in a solitary corner. You know that when Father gets up from his sleep every afternoon he is seldom in a good mood. Yet, *Sono Baba*, you never listen to me, not even if I warn you that you catch a bad cold and perhaps get very sick. Why?" I resent this chiding. "But Gullie," my, nickname for him, "I will not get sick. Why should I get sick? The plants and birds and flowers and trees are cleaner, fresher, with the rain and they don't get sick and I don't believe that I will either. Besides, I shall save you bathing me this evening, for I am much cleaner now than I could be after going for my evening bath under the shower in the bathroom. Rainwater is warmer, but in there in the bathroom it's colder, even if it is hot, which you tell me it is, but it makes me shiver."

I look at him and I think he sees the sulky look in my eyes

and knows that any more talk of my harmless escapade will only reduce me to tears and a moodiness that he knows well, for he and the other servants complain that I am very like a bull: hard, stubborn and impossible to handle once the mood is upon me. Anyway, he says nothing more. I am quickly led into the bathroom and scrubbed dry with a towel, new clothes are brought and I am dressed up. I hear my mother wake, her maids attending to her, bringing her a pot of specially made coffee, and get an aroma that awakens my appetite. I find myself hungry. My sullen mood vanishes, now I want to eat, and to drink coffee with Mother. With an admonishing finger from Gulab, I scamper out of the bathroom, dry and shining, and run through the two rooms to my mother's boudoir. She greets me with a warm hug and a kiss. "Hey, child," she says, "your skin is so soft and fresh—and," with a twinkle in her eyes, "cold. You wicked child, out in the rain I suppose, bathing again! I heard thunder and the maids shut the windows for fear of rain splashing on to my bed. Tell me, was it a heavy fall?" "Yes, Mother, wonderful, wonderful, and I danced naked." A deep sigh from her. "I tell you it's dangerous, you may catch a cold, don't you know? And you didn't stand under a tree, did you, darling?" "No, Mother, not *under*; I was hiding in its branches for a while, then I got scared, ran down the tree and then changed my mind and decided to stay on and then . . . well I just danced in the rain and I feel so fresh and much, much cleaner than when Gullie baths me."

My mother looks at me long and lovingly, between sips of her coffee. Perhaps the taste of that coffee and a recollection of her own childhood, softens her reproaches towards me. She looks at me, one of those sidelong glances coming out from her wonderful face—a glance that is filled with laughter and humour. She smiles and then laughs. "Come on, you little devil, drink some coffee, only for goodness sake don't

let your father know ; he'll say I am encouraging you to catch a cold, and, instead of you, the real culprit, getting a scolding, I shall be the one to get the full weight of his anger and——"

Suddenly, silently my father creeps in, like a Rajput panther in soft rubber-soled slippers. I always thought he wore them to enable him to move around noiselessly so that none of us could hear him and this would give him a sort of omnipresence in all the rooms of that big house. "You've had your bath early, Bisano, your hair looks damp. Why don't you dry properly?" I daren't trust my eyes to meet his. "Oh yes, Father, yes, I had a good bath and I'm drinking some coffee; my hair, oh yes, I'll dry it; it is almost dry, honestly, Father, Gulab rubbed it dry, see, feel." I move closer to him. "All right, son, run along and play now, but not outside in the wet garden; play inside on the floor of the verandah, and remember, not too much noise; now go on, run along."

I gulp my coffee, and my mother and I look at each other and I feel guilty and yet happily sly, for in our glances, unnoticed by my father, we've both had a joke at his expense, harmless and without a word spoken, but Father doesn't know what made both our eyes share, in that second, a laugh!

I peep out of a window. As suddenly as it started to get misty in the afternoon before the rain fell, it is now sunny, warm, blue. How quickly the earth is drinking up the water from heaven! It is almost dry again, not quite, but very nearly. And I think: 'Perhaps the earth likes to drink water as I do, after playing games in the hot sun, only the earth drinks more than I, or all of us children ever could in a whole year, in one afternoon's rainfall.'

Stepping out on to the verandah I see the little birds, all varieties, shiver and shake the water out of their feathers, stretching their legs, preening with their delicate beaks the

wet feathers. And I wonder, did they enjoy it as much as I did? I am sure they did, for their eyes seem clear and bright, and I feel they are happy. Neighbouring children come to play, climbing over walls instead of using the road and coming up the drive to our house. Jumping walls being a quick way of saving precious hours for playing, it had become an unwritten law that for play we jumped walls, for studies we walked the longest distance, to kill time! Then there was the gold and red curtain of sunset, swift and quick, and the red setting sun; soon it was night, and the cold, distant and yet bright stars all came out. Then dinner and bed. Tucking me in bed that night, Gulab didn't speak a word. I could see he was still afraid of what might have happened to him if Father caught me bathing in the rain, and before he switched out the light all he did was wave a threatening finger at me as much as to say: "If I catch you next time . . ." I fell asleep.

Looking back upon the gossamer tapestry of my childhood, how clearly I see certain pictures. The first pictures are those of the beauty of my home. And simultaneously I think of my mother and how much she meant to me and how much I loved her and how great was the influence of her love on my young life. Of course all children, everywhere, should think their parents are wonderful, but in India we are taught that one's parents are the earthly aspects of divinity upon earth; they stand on earth for the gods up in heaven, and we should touch their feet in reverence on special occasions, and always get their blessings at every opportunity.

You see my mother was Burmese, a Karen. And these folk, coming from the land of Burma, are often called the Irish of the East. Only there is more sun shining in Burma than ever shines in Ireland for all its magic, and the sad and grey churches of Ireland do not gleam like the rising, towering, gold pagodas of my mother's country. Burma is a land of

sunny people, smiling, quick tempered, hospitable and fun-loving, where the women work harder than the men. I was always proud of my mother when I used to walk with her in Bassein or Rangoon where I went with my parents on those few occasions as a child when they took me for my mother's annual visit to her native land.

How well I remember her. The walk of Burmese women is, I think, the most graceful, dignified and beautiful of any women anywhere in this world today, except perhaps those of Bali. And my mother walked like none other that I can remember from those far off childhood days. I recall the day she took me to visit the *Shwe Da Goan* pagoda in Rangoon. Her face, usually smiling, took on a distant, serious, meditative look. We went in a horse-drawn carriage. The coachman opened the door to us. My mother got out and then helped me out; I couldn't make the big distance to climb out of those high carriages without Mother literally carrying me down from the perched body that was the carriage. Then I remember she spread her Burmese parasol, a wonderful shell-pink affair with large painted chrysanthemums, over us, and we walked slowly and steadily up and up those never-ending steps to reach the main courtyard and temple of these fabulous shrines. On the way up we met innumerable poor people asking for alms. But I had eyes only for my mother. I remember tugging at her hand and begging her to allow me to buy some marigold and pink lotus and jasmine blossoms. They looked so beautiful and smelt so good, reminding me of our garden in Bangalore. And then after she had got them for me and when the time came for me to place them before the altar of Lord Buddha, I didn't want to part with them, and it was only after being scolded and made to feel ashamed by Mother that I hesitantly placed them on the altar of the reclining Buddha.

I was always so possessive of the beautiful. I resented any-

thing, everything, that parted me from what my mind found beautiful and pleasing in nature and in life. I couldn't bear the night blotting out the sunset, or being made to leave lakes and the sea by my appointed wards. For it was like going back to darkness away from the beauty one drank of. My mother made me kneel at several shrines and burn incense sticks. How alluring is the perfume and smell of our Eastern Temples, be they Buddhist or Hindu. And what colourful places wherein to worship God. Surely God was a wonderful being full of colour and a love of ritual and beauty. How tenderly my mother explained to me the teaching of the Lord Buddha during those treasured visits to the pagoda, whether in Rangoon where our boat from India landed, or in the interior, sailing up the Irrawady river on our way to Bassein, the home of my parents before I was born in India.

My father settled in Bangalore, India, because the climate was so good and Bassein, he found, irritated what was liverish in his particular constitution. I was fortunate in that choice, for I was the richer for having drunk deep from the twin lands of Burma and India. And, as my mother used to say, both Burma and India were the richer and the more fortunate for having had Lord Buddha simplify in his eight-fold path the teachings of the ancient books and truths.

I can never forget the indelible impression it made on my mind and spirit, as my mother told me, from time to time the various stories of Jatakas of Lord Buddha and his spirit of love and sacrifice made in innumerable forms and incarnations before he, Lord Buddha, was reincarnated as the saviour of the world, and my mother told me this was all five hundred years before Jesus Christ came to enlighten Israel. "You see, darling, two of the world's great saviours of mankind were from the east; they rose like the sun which rises in the east. And you must try to believe and become one with the spirit of these God men, and this you can do if you listen carefully

and read when you grow up all their preachings and stories and truths from the sacred books of those times. You see the Bible and the Dhammapada (book of Lord Buddha's teachings) are one."

"But tell me, Mother," I asked, "why does Lord Buddha lie down on his right side, and why does he wear gold robes, and why does he seem so calm and smiling? Shouldn't he look worried from telling everybody what to do and how to act in the right way? And why do all the pictures and statues of Christ show him bleeding with thorns in his head and nails in his hands? And why do the pictures and paintings I see in the Roman Catholic chapel and school always represent such terrible sufferings?" These were the recurring questions my dear mother was patiently made to answer from time to time. And she was always simple, direct, childlike in her answers to me about these perplexing questions that I, her young and quenchlessly eager son, kept asking her. And I preferred to ask her rather than Father. You see, my father had been put right off religion by a very strict grandfather. My father's grandfather, according to my father, used to rise at three in the morning and take a bath, winter or summer. The winters are biting cold in Ajmer and Bikaner in Rajputana where my father was brought up. After bathing at this ungodly hour of the night, my father's grandpa, eager to enlighten his family would awaken his children and grandchildren and eagerly make them sit through the interminable *Pujas* (prayer ceremonies) in which all strict Hindus delight. Well, it may have taught the old gentleman a lot about God, but it completely put my father against the ritual and complicated system of worship. My father always said there was Truth, there was Nature, and there was one's Will, and if these were what God gave one, that was sufficient. But he believed that idol worship was a waste of time. Instead, he said, it was more useful to study and work and rely upon oneself. That

was nearer Truth and the reason why we were born, and the way to achieve success.

So you see, my father's explanation of religion or philosophy to my thirsty mind did not illuminate me as did the method sought by my mother of colourfully and patiently explaining the mysteries of Lord Buddha. "One must love, one must be tolerant." Her slanting eyes looked more Buddha-like than ever as she explained it to me. "You see, Lord Buddha himself had gone through torments such as few can withstand; it was all the more difficult for him because he was born richer than the richest Indian Raja of today, and renounced it all. Imagine anybody asking you for your little toy engines, or your tops or kites that you treasure, how would you feel, giving them up? Well, Lord Buddha when he was Prince Siddhartha gave it up. From untold years of seeking, suffering and wanderings, the Truth finally dawned on him. And when he realised that great enlightenment, which you've seen depicted on the Buddhist temples painted in colourful frescoes, he gave richly, generously from his knowledge till the day he died and because it is Truth and from God, that giving and that light shine and enlighten the path of those who are tormented in the darkness of their own confused lives."

My mother's voice dropped to a whisper. I was ready to start crying because of the sadness with which my mother had told me the story; it was all so touching and so convincing and true. "But, Mother, everybody wants to be happy, why isn't everybody happy all the time, always?" I asked impatiently. My mother looked at me again and I thought somehow that her look reminded me of the reclining Buddha and his benign glance, filled with compassion and love. "But, my child, Lord Buddha's path and teachings unfold the greatest, most undreamed of happiness in this world. He who follows his teachings becomes the happiest

person on earth. Don't you want to be happy, my son?"

"Yes, Mother, always happy, nothing but happy, but how?"

"Lord Buddha said that anyone who would weed out from his mind and heart all hatred and evil thoughts and all bad desires, and replace them with good thoughts and worthy desires, and fill his heart with charity towards others, and compassion towards suffering people and animals and life in general, while cultivating a sense of detachment from all worldly possessions, then that person awakens the Divinity within the spirit and within the self. And only then would the greatest peace and happiness follow simultaneously, instantly."

"Really, Mother?" I said. "Is that true? Then may I give away to him who asks, whatever he wants?" I clutched my mother's arm asking her this, impatiently waiting for a reply.

"Well, yes, my son, it is by giving that one pleases God."

CHAPTER FOUR

First American Tour

MARTHA GRAHAM, that pioneer of American modern dancing, once said to me: "America is many nationalities, West and East, all merging, seeking, moving in rhythm, all of which I try and capture in the spirit of today. I use both forms and draw from both the western rhythm of the dance and certainly from the eastern, too. America is washed by the Atlantic on the one side; on the other, the warm waters of the Pacific caress us."

The warm waters of the Pacific caress us. . . . Well, it was *via* the Pacific that I had come to America. I had waved to Mount Fujiyama in Japan sadly. I had in my mind been ignorant and confused about the approach, and forgotten that it was the Pacific and not the Atlantic. I kept looking out for the Statue of Liberty, as we neared the coast of the New World.

"Say, is this the wardrobe of a man or woman?" a casual, burly, tough-looking Customs officer demanded. "What's this stuff?" drawing a Javanese *kris* or sword acquired there during my tour. "And this, and this . . . and this," and so he went right through my strange and exotic assortment of stage costumes. In the end, formalities over, my friend Janta and

I stepped into a car, after carefully trusting our luggage to a travel agent, and sped off for Hollywood. The kindly wife of the American Ambassador in Tokyo, Mr. Grew, had given me precious letters of introduction to Cecil B. de Mille. And Rubinstein, the great pianist, said that he would influence the powerful Hurok to give me a season in New York.

In my pockets were those precious letters. One was to Cecil B. de Mille, and some other notables of the famous film capital. As the car sped towards the movie city, I could not help thinking of the great film stars. Would I meet any of them, I wondered! Aside from the film world, I would also meet Max Reinhardt, that genius of the European theatre and stage. I was fortunate, I was happy and people were kind.

How strange and wonderful the land and the smiling people of California were to me, and how sunny and blue the skies were, how wide the open spaces of the land. Nothing was cramped. Everything was big, bigger than I had seen till then. I had not yet seen how soaring those architects' dreams were and how man's ingenuity, cramped for space, could send buildings heavenwards in New York. It certainly was a land of plenty, and of friendliness.

One night in March 1938 I was seated at dinner with the supreme showman of Hollywood films, Cecil B de Mille. He took me around his house, filled with so many relics and antiques of rare beauty and value. I remember the various models he showed me of his then recent film *The Crusades*, and with what detail he explained each of the tireless researches he had made in order to satisfy his exacting sense of perfection. No pains were ever spared, money was no object, but everything had to be exact and perfect. He was handsome, with the distant, detached, cool look of a sage, a seer, a sort of *rishi* of the cinema world. But whatever he had to say on or about his religious outlook on life would be through his chosen medium, the films. And he was kindly. There was

very little of the great 'I Am' so typical of the chain-cigar smoking, nauseating people of some film organisations. Everything about him was outsize; and yet he was simple and kind. I was reminded, now and again that he had the same gentleness and simplicity as Gandhi.

"I have a deep respect for your country, her arts and the great works such as the *Gita* and those of Tagore. Gandhi is a great man working for peace. Do you have a film industry in India?" The gentle and searching, almost detached eyes of De Mille looked at me. I told him how impressed I was by the hospitality everywhere.

"Of course, Mr. de Mille, you do realise that if it were not for India, America would never have been discovered?"

He looked surprised. "That's a new one on me. How did you figure that one out?"

"You see," I went on, "Columbus set sail from Europe to reach India and her wealth and gold, and instead . . . found America!"

I once wrote him: "You've done enough Western films of every size and theme. Why don't you be the first to do, as only you can, something of the East, something from my country?"

"I am over seventy . . . and I don't plan that far ahead . . . but . . ." he wrote back.

I am looking forward to his *The Ten Commandments*, his latest film. The world of America, and the rest of mankind, may well heed the message of *The Ten Commandments*. Buddha spoke them five hundred years before Christ, and then way down to the present age the odd voice has warned mankind.

On a warm, beautiful evening in March of 1938 I went to the hill-top home of that socialite and charming hostess, Mrs. Bernadine Szold Fritz. And it was here that I met Max Reinhardt. Intense eyes, short stature, but power emanating from him.

"I would like one day to do a play with you . . . Indian subject . . . your sensitive face," and so we talked. I also met Adrian, who had dreamed up Garbo's fantastic dresses in her pictures; Janet Gaynor, that tender heroine of *Seventh Heaven*. And Alice Terry . . . I had never forgotten her sensitive and startling beauty in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. And sitting in a far corner, quietly, unobtrusively . . . the lady in grey, with a strange peaked hat . . . I was introduced to her by my hostess. "Mercedes, this is Ram." And that was how Pandora's Box of the magic screen opened to me . . . and many new threads, all gleaming and shining started off a chain reaction of influence in my life. . . .

I also had delightful dinners afterwards in the home of Adrian, whose house was filled with antiques and carpets, and lit like a technicolor picture. And there, one evening, I met Nazimova, the Camille of another day, of the silent screen. She spoke of Natasha Rambova who had a lot to do with her film work, as being the only integrating force and influence in the life of Valentino. "After Natasha and Rudy parted, he disintegrated. Artists need influences, good influences. They need the right minds and the right people to influence them to give of their best." How true those words were. Thinking today, and with more perspective, I wonder to what degree the Roman Emperor, Hadrian would have been inspired to do the great things he did for his country, if it had not been for the love of his ideal, the famous Antinous. Stiller and Garbo . . . what a lot I had heard about his influence on this great actress. He had a vision, a perspective of her genius, and that flame-like quality in the young Garbo's personality. Being detached and interested in the instrument that Garbo was, and developing her genius as an actress, he was able to be impersonal. The fact that she was the most beautiful girl in the world did not touch him. As a woman, so I am often told during my visits in Stockholm, she did not

interest him. It was that flame within that he wanted to fan to volcanic life. . . . Poor Vishnu, had Garbo come instead of Mohini, and in her silent way just stood before him as he, that God, sat meditating in his forest hermitage, he certainly would have been seduced by one look alone. Poor Mohini, that mythical goddess, had to dance herself breathless before he was disturbed from his meditations!

As I have already said, it was Rubinstein who was instrumental in getting Sol Hurok interested in a recital of mine, for when I danced some months later after Hollywood at the 46th Street Theatre in New York, it was because of the interest that Rubinstein had shown in me.

"Tonight—First New York Appearance—Ram Gopal," the advertisement read. In the next line was the final concert in Carnegie Hall of Marian Anderson. That was what I read that morning. It all seemed so strange. And this was New York, soaring into the sky. How breath-taking it all was! New York was 'Today', it was 'Now'. The East was 'Yesterday' . . . and all its thousands of years. Later, I found that Europe was the yesterday that influenced today's day. But New York was this very instant, this NOW. And how awed I became of its rhythm and its babble and movement and smell of power and money. But I loved it nevertheless. And then I danced. I danced alone to recorded music. I remember nothing of that recital today, except the shadow of Mercedes near me, driving away to some quiet place for supper after the show.

"I sat next to Martin, and he said he thought you a very great dancer," Mercedes said.

"But who is Martin?" I asked.

"Only one of the leading dance critics. What he says influences the masses."

John Martin, Walter Terry and others were most kind and constructively critical of my performance, given so soon

after Shankar, my countryman, had danced there only a short while ago. But Shankar gave them, in the words of one of my American admirers, 'the works'. Translated, this meant sex, girls, instruments and himself, with a large company to carry him through the full two-hour programme. And I had danced alone! Carl Van Vechten, who had written such vivid accounts of the dancing of Pavlova and Duncan, long, long before me wrote of my debut: "Ram Gopal . . . bears us away with him from the untruths of everyday life into the reality of his mystic visions. . . ."

I loved every single instant of my first visit to America. On the night I sailed away, a crescent moon hung low in the sky and the stars were bright. Of course it was Siva, winking at me sleepily from the heavens, telling me that this city was something dreamed up out of his meditations. All these thoughts came in a reverie of sadness and sighing as I saw the silhouette of this city of 'Now' fade into the blue of that sunset.