

Karuna Sagari

Bharatanatyam Dancer

Founder Director

BNN Dance, Coimbatore

Karuna Sagari Venkatachalam is a classical Bharatanatyam dancer initially trained by her mother, Dr. Neela Venkatachalam. She graduated with honours from the world-renowned performing arts institution, the Kalakshetra Foundation, Chennai, in 2008. For 10 years, outstanding choreographer, Sheejith Krishna guided her in her pursuit of this dance form and its related specializations. Currently, she is under the mentorship of veteran danseuse, Malavika Sarukkai. She holds a Masters degree in South Asian Studies from the University of Heidelberg, Germany besides a Master Degree in Tamil from Annamalai University.

Lineage:

The inheritor of a rich oral-matrilineal legacy in poetry and music, Karuna Sagari received rigorous, in-depth instruction in bhakti spiritualism, poetics, and performance from her grandmother, Smt. Swarna Somasundaram, an esteemed scholar of classical and medieval Tamil literature. She has been immersed since childhood in a centuries-old devotional corpus, and the medieval bhakti traditions of *Tevaram*, *Tiruvagasam* and *Tiruppugazh*.

Choreography:

Karuna Sagari's talent in choreography has been recognised by many stalwarts in the field. Her work into ancient Tamil works such as *Tevaram*, *Kambaramayanam*, *Divyaprabandham* and *Manimekhalai* have shown imagination and depth. Her works might draw a poem from before two millennia and employ an art form which is handed down over a few centuries while keeping the message contemporary, alive and relevant. She treads carefully between abstract concepts, concrete happenings and harmonious aesthetics. Her love for Tamil has inculcated in her a fascination at how people connect with their mother tongue which pushes her works to explore areas which are not contextually, culturally or linguistically bound to the Bharatanatyam performance space.

Karuna Sagari has choreographed and presented a range of thematic performances, some of which are:

- Tiruchendur - Relentless Encounters between light and Darkness within us - An Ensemble Production that sheds light on the philosophical significance of the Kanda Sashti at Tiruchendur at Narada Gana Sabha, 2022
- "The distance between you and me" - An evening of Sangam poetry through Bharatanatyam, 2019

- Uyirgal Pala, a Bharatanatyam presentation that celebrates plurality through the poetry of Appar, Aandaal, a Sangam Bard and Kabir, 2019.
- “Noyyal - The story of a little river” (2016), a 75-minute dance production which showcases the river Noyyal through historical, literary, environmental and societal perspectives
- ‘Sirai Irundaal Aetram – An ensemble production featuring the Sundara Kandan and Yuddha Kandan from Kambaramyamam’ (2012)
- ‘Maatram’, shedding light on reformatory justice brought by a courtesan who turned a Buddhist nun, from Seethalai Sathanar’s Manimekhalai in the annual Thematic Festival of Narada Gana Sabha in August, 2011
- *Adiyaar Tirunokku*, showcases the myriad nature of devotees’ experience of God through the works of mystic poets from around India 2012;
- *Tiru Neriya Tamizh Suvai* (2009), portraying divine compassion through canonical Tamil Verse presented for the diamond Jubilee Celebrations of Tamil Isai Sangam, Chennai.
- *Meenakshi Kalyanam* as part of Vivaha festival conducted by International Dance Alliance, Bangalore, 2009;
- *Krishnamruta Sagaram* depicting Krishna through pan-Indian mystical poetry in 2008
- *Ammayiye Appa* representing the inseparability of Shiva and Shakti, 2008.

Performances:

Karuna has performed widely in ensemble and solo productions at prestigious venues in India and abroad. Her performances include the dance drama *Kutrala Kuravanji* with the Kalakshetra Repertory at the Music Academy in Chennai, thematic presentations at the International Dance Alliance (IDA), Bangalore, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, ISKCON, Coimbatore, the Mangalore Dance Festival, Rajalakshmi Fine Arts, Coimbatore and Perur Natyanjali and Narada Gana Sabha, Chennai. She has toured with Bharata Kalanjali, the internationally recognized dance repertory of VP and Shanta Dhananjayan, performing in Sheejith Krishna’s work, *Parinamam*, premiered in Mauritius and Re-Union Islands in 2010. She performed at the 'Start up' of GenFest 2012 in Hungary and also at the 'Youth for United world' Conference, Italy for the Focolare movement. Karuna was part of Sheejith Krishna’s production, *Saadhrshyam* at the Kalakshetra Foundation in 2013. She also performed in *Tagore Centre, Embassy of India* in Berlin in the year 2016. She was featured in the I Dance hence I am (IDIA) Virtual Festival 2021. She performed at Sangeet Natak Akademi’s Amrit Swardhara Festival at Somnath as part of the Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav in 2022. She is an ICCR empanelled artist. She choreographed and presented the thematic work , ‘Tiruchendur’ for Natyarangam’s Uthsava Bharatham as part of their Silver Jubilee Celebrations with 7 Dancers and 7 renowned musicians.

Collaborations:

Karuna Sagari collaborated with Tamarai Design Studio on *Thunnal* in July 2018 which showcased India's rich textile traditions; *Beyond Borders* was a collaboration with poet, Shobhana Kumar in September 2016 which focused on bridging art, poetry, music and expressions through verse and dance; She presented a performance titled "Contemplation of Impermanence" along with Polish Bharatanatyam dancer, Alexandra Romanova at Heidelberg in 2015 at TiKK Karlstorbahnhof, Heidelberg; She presented a performance titled "Supernova Und Tanz Der Teilchen (Supernova and Dance Particles)" in collaboration with Aravinthan Vishwanathan, a molecular biologist and Dr Debarati Chatterjee, an astrophysicist.

Lectures and Writing:

Karuna regularly writes for magazines such as *Sruti*, a premier monthly on the performing arts of India. She writes a weekly column for the Trinity Mirror Newspaper from Jan 2020 on Literature and Performing arts. Karuna's article is part of the centenary tribute to MS Subbulakshmi published by *Sruti* edited by Gowri Ramnarayan and V Ramnarayan.

Outreach:

Karuna Sagari volunteers for *Shanti Ashram*, a Gandhian Organization inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's vision of Sarvodaya. She is on the College Board of KCLAS, Kumaraguru College of Liberal Arts, Coimbatore 2018- 20. In 2018, she participated and performed at "A Pilgrimage to the Source" which was a coming together of 20 Hindu Academics accompanied by members of the Catholic Abba School in Northern Italy. In 2016, she attended a conference on climate change convened by the *Religions for Peace* Asian Religious Youth Peace Camp, where she spoke about using classical dance to create empathy in students towards local water bodies. As a result, she took the dance production "Noyyal Azhaikkiral" to 7500 students in and around Coimbatore.

During her Masters, Karuna conducted a seminar titled *Performing emotions* at the University of Heidelberg in 2015. In March 2014, she was a part of "Together Towards the Unity of the Human Family. Chiara and Religions" (Italy) which saw the coming together of people across 30 countries and 6 religions. The proceedings, showcasing her design, were published by the Narada Gana Sabha. Further, she participated and performed at the Genfest at Hungary (2012) and was also part of the Youth for a United world Conference at Rome organized by the Focolare Movement. In 2010, she choreographed and performed a documentary titled "Say no to violence against women" at *Religions for Peace, New York*. In 2009, she was one of the mentors for *Super Congress - an International Youth Conference* at Coimbatore in association with Focolare Movement, Italy. She has given dance appreciation lectures in various educational institutions for Indian and foreign students.

Institution Building:

Karuna Sagari founded Bhakti Natya Niketan (BNN) in June 2008. BNN Dance is an institution which teaches Bharatanatyam based on the Kalakshetra *bani* and adopting its own organic pedagogy. Students learn dance organically, the way a child acquires his/her mother tongue.

Over the last decade, BNN's focus has been on three major facets: the organic pedagogy, performances, and outreach. BNN draws inspiration from the *arasa maram* (peepul tree or the bodhi tree). When a breeze ripples through the *arasa maram*, each leaf dances individually though nurtured by the same root. Likewise, BNN aspires for each of its students to retain their individuality, fostered and nurtured by the parent institution.

In line with Karuna's belief that Bharatanatyam need not be considered an elitist art and that this art form can be made available to everyone despite financial status, BNN taught at *Vidyavanam*, Anaikatti to more than 60 Tribal and Underprivileged Children for 9 years.

Awards:

Karuna has received the following awards

- ❑ 'Yuva kala Ratna' Award (2020) from PSG Institution, Coimbatore
- ❑ An Aikya Award (2013) with the title '**Women defending our Culture**' by Global Adjustments.
- ❑ The 'Vasantalakshmi Narasimhachari Talent endowment award' by the Narada Gana Sabha (2011).
- ❑ Best Report Design award 2010 at the Thennangur Natya Sangraham.