



# Movement in Stills

THE DANCE AND LIFE OF KUMUDINI LAKHIA

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## A PARTICULAR HOME

**K**umudini Jayakar spent the first seven years of her life on 6th Road in Khar (a borough of North Bombay, now North Mumbai). If you go there now you will find two 6th Roads that run in two different directions, one in New Khar and one in Old Khar. The differentiation is confusing, since both are under reconstruction with new high-rise buildings sprouting along the narrow lanes. Many of these complexes have placards on the front gates, though Krishna Cottage, Kumudini's house, is not to be found. Any one of these plots could have been where the house stood, but there is no sign. Only a few old houses remain, some abandoned, others converted into apartments, and only a handful seem untransformed. They are houses with balconies and wide entrances, some of them with pillars, all of them colonial in style, remnants from another era.

The Jayakars were an upper-middle class Maharashtrian family living in the waning days of the Raj, and their taste was Indian in a very traditional sense. The women wore Maharashtrian saris in natural fibres, never nylon or rayon or the various synthetics that are available today. The prints were classically traditional in subtle, dignified colours. They liked jewellery, but only wore Indian designs and real gems. They paid attention to details like shoes, though they did not necessarily wear flashy heels or paint their toenails red. Their homes were decorated with Indian textiles and handicrafts, minus the dizzying barrage of inlaid mirrors and tie-dyed *bandhani* prints. These women were discriminating in their choices and particular about their aesthetic.

Despite the propensity for classical Indian style, Kumudini's family was not opposed to English influences. On her mother's side the sisters had curious 'English' names based on the years they were born. The eldest, born in the silver jubilee year of the king's reign, was thus named Jubilee. The youngest, born the year 'Evening in Paris' perfume was introduced to England, became Paris. Kumudini's own mother, a middle child, was named after a famous English fabric, Lawn, which reached India just before she was born. Later, when she married



A family portrait. Kumudini sitting with her mother and her father standing behind them.

It was on one of these trips that Kumudini places her first memory. They were in South India visiting the Rameshwaram Temple in Tamil Nadu. The temple town was on the coast and the family was spending the day on the beach. Kumudini was about three years old and yet the memory remains vivid because of her extreme fear of water (ironic because later she would become a diving champion while at boarding school). "My father and my grandfather caught hold of me and threw me into the sea. My father caught me by my shoulders so my head was leaning back and I could see straight into his eyes. In the memory I can't hear myself screaming but I imagine that I was. He seemed to be laughing at my predicament and I hated him at that moment. Once in the water it was not so bad because it wasn't very deep. It was the first time that I realized that sea water is so salty."

#### LESSONS

It was her mother who wanted her to dance. They had gone to see a movie, one of the few Indian films they attended, and when they returned home Kumudini, who was six at the time, stood in the living room and re-enacted a popular dance sequence in the film, performed by Mohamed Ali. Her mother watched, perhaps with some amusement, this child of hers moving so gracefully. "She has talent, a lot of talent," she told Dinkar. Leela herself was deeply involved in vocal music and was taking lessons from a famous teacher, Narayan Rao Vyas. Kumudini accompanied her on these trips and remembers being struck by her mother's concentration. In those hours, it seemed that nothing else existed for her mother, and even Kumudini disappeared. There was intensity in her mother's singing, a sound that came from a secret place. Kumudini loved listening to this voice, but she could not remain still. To keep her daughter occupied, Leela found a Kathak teacher in the area, Mohanlal, and asked if Kumudini could join his class. After her first Kathak lesson, Kumudini felt disappointed. She preferred listening to her mother's voice and moving about as she pleased.

When Leela gave birth to her son, Suresh, the lessons ended. Kumudini's brother was seven years her junior and in the beginning

not a very healthy child. To help care for the child, Leela went to her maternal home in another area of Bombay, far from the singing and dancing classes, and Kumudini was secretly relieved.



Suresh Jayakar.

But when they returned to Krishna Cottage a few months later, Leela was adamant, "We must find her a dance teacher, Dinkar. This girl will go far, I tell you," she said. And so Dinkar, through word of mouth, found Ashique Hussein, a well-known film actor at the time who was also known for his Kathak of the Janakiprasad Gharana.<sup>2</sup> Leela took Kumudini to see him, and Hussein was impressed enough to come to their house each week in his extravagant car, chocolates in tow, to teach this young child. "I'll make her into a great film actress," Hussein promised Leela, who again seemed amused. To her surprise, he soon made good on that promise. As a child, Kumudini danced alongside Hussein in two blockbuster films, the original *Mother India* and *Daughters of India*. She recalls that in one of the films she had to dance on a makeshift ramp throwing flowers on the bride and groom in a wedding scene. Years later Kumudini tried to track these 1930's films