

Kalamandalam Neelakantan Nambisan: A Portrait

 By IAR DESK – November 9, 2020



Kerala Kalamandalam turns 90 today. On this date in 1932, the Kerala institution handed its protegee Neelakantan Nambisan to Kathakali stage. Year 2020 is the trendsetter's centenary.

For young Neelakantan Nambisan, the [Bharatapuzha](#) in central Kerala functioned as downstream [Cauvery](#) along Tamil Nadu. In the late 1930s.

Those days, [Nambisan](#) was a student of [Kathakali](#) music. [Kalamandalam](#), where he took lessons on vocals for the classical dance-theatre, was just south of the river. On the other bank was Mundaya village, near [Shoranur](#).

The budding singer had to cross the [Bharatapuzha](#) to reach the guru's house for higher studies. [Venkitakrishna Bhagavathar](#), nearing 60, would eagerly train [Nambisan](#). Back in [Kalamandalam](#), [Kavassery Swamikutty](#) was his guru. Veteran [Pulappatta Kuttan](#) headed the wing.

[Bhagavathar's](#) music carried Carnatic elements in much stronger dose than the other two teachers. For, he hailed from a [Tamil Brahmin](#) family with ancestry tracing to [Thanjavur](#) belt. His forefathers were into traditional [Sampradaya](#) [Bhajana](#) that flourished towards the end of the 18th century as a choral singing at temples in praise of gods.

[Bhagavathar](#) died in 1957 at the age of 76. By then [Nambisan](#) had risen in stature. He was ripe enough to mentor students. Indeed, he did have a legion of disciples during the three decades as a teacher in his alma mater. He subsequently taught at PSV [Natyasangham](#) in [Kottakkal](#). [Nambisan](#) further carried out a historic mission: he refashioned the music for [Krishnanattam](#) dance-drama in the pilgrim town of [Guruvayur](#).

For [Kathakali](#), [Nambisan](#) best blended local [Sopana](#) [Sangeetham](#) with Carnatic, sounding a genre that came to define [Kathakali](#) music. It emerged along with an overall revival of the art-form with a fresh crop of practitioners in acting, percussion and make-up.

Debut & rise

Nambisan was only 12 when he debuted on Kathakali stage. That was on this day, nine decades ago. November 2, 1932. At Kalamandalam, on the second anniversary of the performing-arts institution found with poet **Vallathol** Narayana Menon as a key figure.

It was later Nambisan did studied under Bhagavathar. “Kalamandalam facilitated it. Vallathol permitted him to go to Mundaya,” says PM Janardhanan, Nambisan’s son.

Mundaya Ranganathan, son of Venkitakrishnan, used to hail Nambisan as a musician with surplus talent. “My father had a few other pupils. But he loved Nambisan like none other,” says Ranganathan in a 1996 Kathakali workshop in Sreekrishnapuram of Palakkad district. “When Bhagavathar got invitations to sing for Kathakali, he insisted Nambisan assisted him.”

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Critic V Kaladharan notes that Nambisan, for all his love for Carnatic, was seldom ambivalent in his approach to Kathakali. “Today we see lot of Kathakali vocalists performing with classical music in the back of their mind. Nambisan had no such existential issues,” he says. “Towards early 1980s though, his voice began to falter.”

Scholar K B Raj Anand says a paradigm **shift** Bhagavathar initiated in Kathakali music found its flourish in Nambisan. Researcher K S Rajeev quotes books that speak of the role of Carnatic maestro Palakkad **Rama** Bhagavathar, the younger brother of Venkitakrishnan, in re-tuning the vocals of certain story-plays. This reinforces the trendsetting influence Carnatic wielded in Kathakali music.

Nambisan had earlier learned south Indian classical from cultural enthusiast Kakkad Karanavappad, who was also instrumental in founding Kalamandalam in 1930. Nambisan also took lessons in maddalam and, later in Kalamandalam. He gained proficiency in Sanskrit and Malayalam, besides functional knowledge in Hindi and English.

Yesteryear memories

Late Kathakali maestro Vazhenkada **Kunchu** Nair celebrated a grand 60th birthday in 1968, courtesy a pivotal role by Nambisan.

Percussionist colleague, chenda maestro **Krishnankutty** Poduval, lamented Nambisan’s untimely demise in 1985. Praising Nambisan’s eminence in playing the ilathalam cymbals on the stage and his eminence in singing **ashtapadi**, Poduval notes in a tribute that the vocalist’s exit could portend a loss in the spirit of Kathakali even as the music gains ornamentation.

Late author **Akavoor** Narayanan, who always admired Nambisan’s skills in anchoring Kathakali shows, maintains that stage music needn’t go for a treatment of the entire swaras of any raga. “Only those notes

appropriate to the occasion are stressed, according to the mood and the situation,” he points out in a 2004 book *Perspectives*.

Aymanam Krishna Kaimal recalls in Kathakali *Encyclopaedia* Nambisan’s anguish when the next generation experimented with too much of loops and microtones while modulating sound. “All the same, Nambisan did alter certain ragas to strike the right mood of the scene or character,” he adds.

Thirty-five years since his demise, Kathakali music has undergone massive **changes**. Yet the fundamental approach of the young vocalists tends not to detach way off from that of Nambisan.

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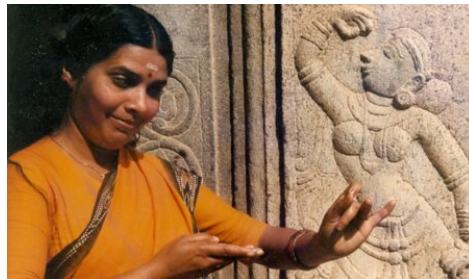
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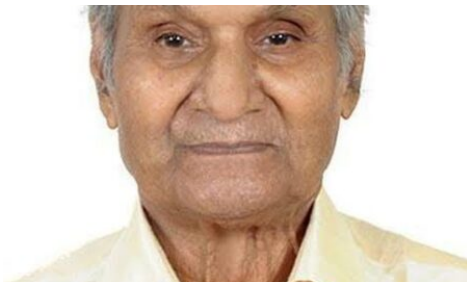
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