

The man who redefined Kathakali's vocal music

From introducing Carnatic ragas and the sruti box to moving around the stage, Venkitakrishna Bhagavathar set new trends

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Venkitakrishna Bhagavathar

In the composite art-form of Kathakali, the vocal music embodies the *vachikaabhinaya* (verbal acting). This feature stands out as a definite departure from its predecessor, Koodiyattam, in which the actors speak in chaste Sanskrit, Prakrit and Malayalam based on the characters they present on stage.

Till the dawn of the 20th century, the vocal music of Kathakali might have faintly followed the canons of *Sopana Sangeetam*, sung by the Marars and Poduwals beside the sanctum sanctorum. After an intimate reading of the visual grammar of Kathakali with its unfailing accent on the navarasas, Mundaya Venkitakrishna Bhagavathar strongly felt that the dance form's vocal music should be redefined and restructured, to empower the text, contexts and characters. He undertook the task almost all alone and the rest is history.

Hailing from a family of musicians in Mundaya, a sleepy village near Shoranur in Palakkad district, Venkitakrishna initially trained in Kathakali under Moothedath Vasudevan Namboodiri. After performing a few female roles, he quit to pursue vocal music under the same guru. Along with his brothers, Raman and Shankaran, he trained in Carnatic music too and by age 20 Venkitakrishna became prominent as the principal vocalist on the

Kathakali stage. He came to be known as Venkitakrishna Bhagavathar in the cultural circles of central Kerala. According to art historian K.P.S. Menon, his training in acting was instrumental in shaping his career as a successful vocalist.

From the perspective of music, Kathakali plays can be broadly divided into two categories — the ones by Kottayath Thampuran and a few others, which seldom allow the vocalists to create an emotional ambience that can surpass the strong visual frames; and the plays by Unnai Warriar, Irayimman Thampi and the like, which offer ample scope for emotive singing, sometimes competing with the actors.

The former demands adherence to the rhythm and tempo of every padam while in the latter the vocalists have to keep in mind the characters as well. Venkitakrishna blended both these qualities in his singing.

INTRODUCING NEW RAGAS

He introduced a host of Carnatic ragas which were new to the vocal music tradition of Kathakali. The conservatives raised their eyebrows when they first heard ragas such as Khamas, Darbar, Kapi, Sindhubhairavi, Chenchurutti and Nattakurunji. He converted lengthy padams into ragamalika in order to salvage the listeners from incredible boredom. Venkitakrishna also systematised the rendering of the shlokas and the dandakams (a prose-verse combination used in Kathakali to truncate several incidents in a play) even while retaining the deshi (indigenous) ragas such as Paadi, Khandaram, Puraneeru, Kanakkurinji, Gaulipandu and Navarasam. Though the phrases of these ragas are repetitive, each one carries a distinctive fragrance appropriate to the character and context. Special care was taken to ensure that the gamakas and brigas employed in the padams did not interfere with the sahitya.

It is well-known that Venkitakrishna introduced the sruti box in Kathakali music and insisted that his co-singers too stick to sruti. Vocalists prior to him were not so keen on following a particular sruti while singing over many nights for many different characters.

Venkitakrishna was not happy when microphones began to invade the Kathakali stage. “He empowered the actors not only through evocative singing but by constantly moving to observe their actions and expressions. In stark contrast, the vocalists today simply stand in front of the pedestal mikes and sing and do nothing to galvanise the actors,” says percussionist and critic Kalamandalam Krishnankutty Poduwal.

Even during his heydays, Venkitakrishna incurred the wrath of the so-called purists, who lamented the marginalisation of *Sopana Sangeetam*. But little did they realise that Carnatic music had already exerted its influence even on Kerala’s traditional temple orchestra, Panchavadyam, and on Thayambaka, the solo recital on the chenda. Interestingly, those who spearheaded these revolutionary changes were Thiruvilwamala Venkichan Swamy and

Kolanthaswamy, both privileged caste Tamils, as was Subrahmanyappattar, the man who refurbished the Kathakali melam (chenda-maddalam combination).

Among the vocalists who accompanied Venkitakrishna on stage, Kalamandalam Neelakantan Nambeesan, in course of time, established a style of his own and ensured its outreach through his distinguished disciples. Yet, Nambeesan admitted that he learnt all the aesthetic nuances of Kathakali music from his guru Venkitakrishna.

Over the years, the vocal music for Kathakali has gone through tremendous transformation, some of which unfortunately runs contrary to the time-tested syntax that reaffirms the identity of the art-form. Which is why it is important to revisit Venkitakrishna's work to understand how he innovated within the frameworks of tradition.

The author is a critic and connoisseur of traditional art forms of Kerala.