

THRIPPEKULAM ACHUTHA MARAR

A versatile melam leader

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If melam processions can raise aural storeys of towering architecture, the diminutive Thripppekulam Achutha Marar lorded over their grandest of varieties. Positioned in the middle of the front row with 15-odd men playing the chenda, the ethnic drum's five-foot-tall emperor made no showy gestures to state his pre-eminence in traditional Kerala orchestras. The concerts would feature no less than 120 artists and often span four hours. Thripppekulam's mastery made the presentation seem unassertive for the onlookers even as the rhythmic cycles revelled in classicism. As the melam continues to be the most popular 'panchari' or 'pandi', his leadership style retained the essential sobriety of temple festivities even amidst the changing aesthetics of a new age.

Thripppekulam is the name of Achutha Marar's family based in a heritage village south of Thrissur in the central part of Kerala. As a member of one community conventionally tasked with the percussive rituals at shrines, little Achu grew up assisting elders at the Bhagavati kshetram near their modest house at Urakam. The routine acts inside the sacred precincts made life busy for the boy—before and after his school hours. During mornings and at sunset hours, he would play not just the chenda but allied instruments such as the slender timila, ilatalam (cymbals) and the chengila (gong) that keeps time. Occasionally, he would render invocatory songs while simultaneously playing the handy edakka for rhythmic rolls. The plain Sopana sangeetam notes would add

solemnity to the pooja inside the sanctorum, ahead of the camphor-lit deeparadhana.

The tacit part of the tradition is that youngsters learn its basics through practice straight away, and it is only during their teens that they train formally. The brilliant in the lot delve into the theoretical nuances and emerge as maestros with an organic sense of beauty. A shining example was Thripppekulam Achutha Marar (1921-2014). As the cultural world celebrates the icon's centenary with numerous programmes, vignettes of his eventful life mirror the successful transition of the melam's vintage Peruvanam tradition from its feudal hangover to the modern era.

Vicissitudes of life took Thripppekulam Achutha Marar to varied platforms of Kerala percussion before he evolved as a melam leader. He was merely in his mid-twenties when the region's biggest temple festival made him, by default, the leader of a prestigious pandi melam. Slinging the cylindrical instrument down from his left shoulder, the youngster at the open-air Arattupuzha Pooram was flanked by practitioners far senior to him. The dawn-time concert, set to seven-beat cycles and their multiplications, marked the conclusion of proceedings climaxed by a line-up of 100-odd caparisoned elephants. The sprawling post-harvest paddy field, a couple of miles away from his home, played



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host to Achutha Marar becoming the Pooram's youngest-ever lead player. On that day, old-timers were very appreciative of the pandi, also featuring rows of bass chenda and cymbals opposite kurumkuzhal pipers and C-shaped kombu trumpet. None regretted the unanticipated absence of Thripppekulam's uncle Govinda Marar, which had triggered a crisis just a while ago.

Despite this early rise to fame in 1946, Thripppekulam had to wait for another three decades to steady himself as a frontline melam artist. That was owing to his diversion into two other streams of percussive music.

One, he learned to play the tavil as a vibrant accompaniment for the nagaswaram. Kurumkuzhal exponent

Nellikkal Narayana Panikkar, who was equally adept in playing the more sophisticated nagaswaram, taught Achutha Marar the techniques of the barrel-shaped drum played with the palm on one side and a stick on the other. Thrippukulam Achutha Marar and kurumkuzhal maestro Kombath Kuttan Panikkar (1929-2011) made a fine pair at weddings and other celebrations—with the tavil and nagaswaram.

Parallely, Achutha Marar began specialising in timila with systematic rigour under the guidance of the colossal Annamanada Parameswara Marar (1908-89). The resultant proficiency made him a busy artist in the panchavadyam that features a timila row as the mainstay of the improvisation-rich neoclassical symphony. In fact, while in his forties, Achutha Marar was more a timila regular in panchavadyam venues than in the melam. Much later, in the 1980s, he went on to play the same slender instrument as an experimental audio backdrop for Koodiyattam when the path-brightening Ammannur Madhava Chakyar performed larger-than-life roles in the ancient Sanskrit theatre.

Achutha Marar's trysts with the chenda did sustain, albeit secondarily, for a long while. As a youngster, he had chosen to learn the intricacies of this instrument from the melam giant Peruvanam Appu Marar. The brief but intense tryst enabled Thrippukulam to perform the hour-long solo tayambaka on the chenda to support its bass variety and cymbals.

Then, into his middle age, Thrippukulam Achutha Marar began gaining prominence as a melam master. By the 1970s, he was a trusted confidant of several lead percussionists. A decade later, Achutha Marar emerged as a popular



Achutha Marar leading a panchari melam

“pramani”, the Malayalam title for the melam leader. Whether it be pooram, ulsavam, vela or thalappoli at temples on occasions big or small, ‘Thrippukulam’ became a household name for melam buffs across central Kerala. In subsequent years, he led the panchari and pandi concerts in both upstate Malabar and parts of Travancore down south. Kerala's grandest of poorams at Thrissur, where Thrippukulam had played the timila in the panchavadyam for 15 years, helped him bloom as a ‘melam pramani’ for the pivotal Tiruvambadi side. Deservingly, he went on to win major honours: the Sangeet Natak Akademi awards at the centre and in his state, the Kerala government's Pallavur Puraskaram and the Kalamandalam award, to name a few.

By then, his assistance with the chenda for hour-long kurumkuzhal preceding the night melams too had acquired a certain star value. Such interfaces largely had Kuttan Panikkar with the kurumkuzhal opposite Thrippukulam. By

now, the pair had emerged out of their nagaswaram-tavil salad days.

At 34, after marrying Padmakshi Marasiar, Thrippukulam shifted base to Irinjalakuda. That led to six decades of stay in that temple town, about 10 kilometres south of his native place. He was a busy artist; during no season was he inactive. So much so that when Achutha Marar died in the summer of 2014, the Koodalmanikyam temple festival notice had displayed his name as a melam pramani that year too. ■

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