

A legend in the family

As the initial few phrases of Kedaragaula wafted through the air, the entire house instantaneously fell silent. The deep voice continued to build the raga, reaching its depths, bringing out the crux, the soul of the raga as it was presented in all its glory. The music was positive, it was happy. It was masculine yet sensitive. A satisfied rest at the shadja brought the magnificent alapana to a close, when a thunderous applause in the recording brought us back to the present. Palakkad Rama Bhagavatar then began singing Muthuswami Dikshitar's *Neelakantham bhajeham* at a brisk, invigorating pace.

I am truly blessed (and overwhelmed to say) that I belong to the Palakkad Rama Bhagavatar family – a fifth generation descendant. Rama Bhagavatar, known within the family as 'Mundaya' Rama Bhagavatar was a star musician in the first half of the twentieth

century. He lived a simple life; his music was pure, traditional, chaste and honest, like him.

I remember listening to his music first when I was in school (my *peria-thatha* – grandfather's elder brother picked up a few recordings, from our ancestral home) – I remember being touched by his music which was unobtrusively powerful.

As a child, when I sang short kriti-s at functions, he used to say that it was the Rama Bhagavatar blood in me.

My great grandfather, Narayana Iyer, and Rama Bhagavatar, were first cousins. My grandfather, C.N. Viswanathan says that they were very close, and both extremely focused individuals. While Narayana Iyer was a respected agriculturist, Rama Bhagavatar and one of his brothers Venkatakrishna Bhagavatar, were musicians of

repute. Venkatakrishna Bhagavatar was a much sought-after Kathakali musician.

Narayana Iyer, and Rama Bhagavatar were not just cousins, they lived practically next door to each other. Narayana Iyer lived in "Chandanassery Madom", while Rama Bhagavatar lived in the "Mullakadu Madom".

My grandfather recalls the boys of both houses playing football together, barefoot, on the sprawling fields that belonged to the family (and keeping in mind the large size of families around the 1930s, there were more boys than two football teams could fill), and then unwinding at 'Mullakadu Madom', where they would drink water and eat snacks, and quietly sneak up upon Rama Bhagavatar practising, in serious conversation with a fellow musician or organiser, or in deep discussion on music with his brother.

Rama Bhagavatar with Papa Venkataramiah (violin) and Mani Iyer (mridanga)



PROFILE

The villagers respected and admired Rama Bhagavatar. He was a musician of national acclaim, and the inhabitants of Mundaya were proud of their son.

Rama Bhagavatar moved to Palakkad after a while, where, incidentally, he also made his debut. An organiser par excellence, he conducted a Tyagaraja Utsavam at Kalpathy (in Palakkad) for many years.

His music

Palakkad Rama Bhagavatar had a lovely, deep voice, a penchant for traditional ragas, that he rendered in his gamakaladen style. It was, essentially, madhyama kala singing, something which he applied to his alapana expositions as well.

Today, we tend to equate a gamaka-oriented style with a 'slow' pace of singing, a myth that is dispelled while listening to Rama Bhagavatar's music. He seamlessly integrated it into an inherently madhyama kala pace of rendition.

What is most popular about his music includes his grand Kharaharapriya and his emotive rendition



Rama Bhagavatar

of Tamil compositions such as *Varugalamo*, and javali-s.

The legacy of musical talent was carried forward by his son-in-law, violinist C.R. Mani Iyer, prime disciple of Mysore T. Chowdiah.

Mani Iyer was also my father's guru. My father and grandparents

recall how he used to stay at their house after they moved to Shoranur, during his concerts in the district, and teach for four or five hours. His classes were intense, and my father tells me that he was punctilious and uncompromising about bowing technique. While my father did not take up the violin professionally, I can still hear the sensitivity in playing he imbibed from his guru. C.R. Mani Iyer and Rama Bhagavatar had a good relationship, and often had long discussions on music.

He was adept at Harikatha and singing for Kathakali. He revered his gurus Palakkad Anantarama Bhagavatar and Umayalapuram Swaminatha Iyer.

Palakkad Rama Bhagavatar was a peaceful man who lived a simple and honest life. He was a spiritual and contented man. Pecuniary gains did not move him. His music was deep; it was emotive yet exhilarating; it was energetic yet reposeful; it was positive but introspective. He was truly a great musician.

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