



PIC: A SANESH

# MEET THE 'GERMAN NAMBIAR'

TNIE speaks to Hartmut Schmidt, a German national who is on a mission to popularise Ottanthullal in Europe. Recently, he performed at the Tripunithura Sree Poornathrayeesa Temple as part of its Vrischikolsavam festival

RONNIE KURIAKOSE

**I**N 1990, when 25-year-old German lad Hartmut Schmidt announced that he was moving to India to learn Ottanthullal, his neighbours feared the worst. "In my small village near Siegen, it was common thinking that people went to India only to smoke ganja," Hartmut quipped, as he spoke to TNIE on the sidelines of his performance at the Vrischikolsavam festival at the Sree Poornathrayeesa temple in Kochi.

The ganja link notwithstanding, there were indeed reasons to worry. For, Hartmut's desire to relocate stemmed from an article he read from a book on Indian dances. "It was on thullal and I found the art form's combination of dance, singing and pantomime quite refreshing. It was only later that I learnt that there was so much social commentary, satire and even philosophy weaved into it. I wanted to learn it and there was only truly one place to do it — the Kerala Kalamandalam," he recalled.

However, his father remained very opposed to the plan. "This was expected, of course. He had concerns about how I could survive as an artist when so many uncertainties remained about the regularity of the performances and payment. He worried that I would have no money... and he was not entirely wrong," said Hartmut, who, if not for this move, would have become an electrician, just like his father and his grandfather.

But when destiny called, Hartmut didn't hesitate. In 1991, the young lad made the long journey to India — more precisely, Kerala. "I was here until 1994, learning thullal at Kalamandalam; and my first performance was in April of 1992 at Guruvayoor," he said. He's performed at numerous venues since — both in India

and back home in Germany, but each such event, he says, is an examination of sorts. "You see, I'm singing in another language. So this question of whether people can understand it plagues me," Hartmut admitted.

Early in his days at Kalamandalam, this question had threatened to derail him from this artistic journey. But Hartmut persevered.

"I simply had to. What really helped were my interactions with ordinary people. Our small talks. I got to connect better with Kerala because of that," he said.

The years that followed saw Hartmut don the artist name Hariyan Harshita. But the real transformation came in 1998 when he joined the tutelage of Kalamandalam Prabhakaran, one of the oldest gurus of thullal and in the words of Hartmut, the best performer in this art form.

"I was very inspired by Prabhakaran master's rendition of Pulindimoksham (The Salvation of Pulindi, a story extolling the invincible powers of Lord Siva). So, I revised and adapted this style. It's the same one I performed at the Tripunithura temple and it came nearly three decades after my first visit here — in 1992, I feel that I have come full circle now," said the 58-year-old.

The journey had not been easy though. Like his father had forewarned, there were times when money was scant and troubles far too plenty. "But I guess it is a problem that artists world over must do with very little. To live from art alone is complicated," he said.

"That said, it is very heartening to see programmes like the ones that Sree Poornathrayeesa temple is conducting. This is a great fillip to local artists. But considering how much is spent on an elephant and other elaborate

decorations..." Hartmut left the obvious unsaid.

But it's more than money or fame or honour for this German. "Over the years, while learning thullal, it dawned on me that this decision of mine to relocate to India after reading an article — as whimsical

as it sounds — has something to do with the soul. Perhaps mine had been in India before. This likely explains why I'm so connected to this land," Hartmut mused.

According to him, art is the gateway to unlocking the mind and everyone should pursue it. "It imbues in you the right values and gives you immense energy. But there'd be a lot of hurdles in the way. You must navigate the naysayers and the negatives. Do it sincerely enough and the rewards — not materialistic, but to the body, heart and soul — are truly wonderful," he added.

One such moment came for Hartmut in 2007, when he performed at his village, in front of his friends and family. "My teacher was there in the front row and he was beaming! Everyone was happy. They knew that I was happy too and content pursuing arts, and wished me well. I wish my father was there too," Hartmut remarked.

Since then, he has been performing Ottanthullal regularly in his home country. "I see it as something like building a little bridge between Germany and India. I translate the performance to German so that it is more accessible to audiences there. Doing so has also earned me the moniker German Nambiar," he said.

Given how his performance was well received at the Sree Poornathrayeesa festival, the temple committee is mulling inviting Hartmut again. TNIE has learnt. "I'd love to be back," responded the artist.

As it sounds — has something to do with the soul. Perhaps mine had been in India before. This likely explains why I'm so connected to this land," Hartmut mused.

According to him, art is the gateway to unlocking the mind and everyone should pursue it. "It imbues in you the right values and gives you immense energy. But there'd be a lot of hurdles in the way. You must navigate the naysayers and the negatives. Do it sincerely enough and the rewards — not materialistic, but to the body, heart and soul — are truly wonderful," he added.

One such moment came for Hartmut in 2007, when he performed at his village, in front of his friends and family. "My teacher was there in the front row and he was beaming! Everyone was happy. They knew that I was happy too and content pursuing arts, and wished me well. I wish my father was there too," Hartmut remarked.

Since then, he has been performing Ottanthullal regularly in his home country. "I see it as something like building a little bridge between Germany and India. I translate the performance to German so that it is more accessible to audiences there. Doing so has also earned me the moniker German Nambiar," he said.

Given how his performance was well received at the Sree Poornathrayeesa festival, the temple committee is mulling inviting Hartmut again. TNIE has learnt. "I'd love to be back," responded the artist.



Hartmut Schmidt, Ottanthullal artist

## Engineering a thullal trend

TNIE talks to Kalamandalam Vishnu M Gupta about his mission to bring all of Kunchan Nambiar's works to life on stage

NIHARIKA PRAMOD

**D**ECKED in an elaborate costume and face painted in vibrant green, Kalamandalam Vishnu M Gupta is quick to inspire awe among the audience with his melodious baritone and seamless transition of facial expressions. The Palakkad resident is a civil engineer turned Ottanthullal artist who has been honing his craft since he was a teenager.

Vishnu made headlines when he wrote, choreographed and performed a thullal based on the life of his late guru and renowned Ottanthullal artist Kalamandalam Geethanandan last year, on the latter's death anniversary. "This tribute was my gurudakshina," Vishnu says.

Though traditional thullal draws its stories from mythology, Vishnu also writes original verses. During the pandemic, he wrote and performed a thullal piece inspired by the Covid regulations to spread awareness among the people. The video went viral on social media even garnering praise from ministers. "When Kunjan Nambiar founded this art form, he wanted to highlight the inequalities and injustices of society, as well as the problems faced by the people. Covid is one such issue that plagued contemporary society," asserts Vishnu.

Though he came from a family with no background in arts, Vishnu never lacked the support of his parents. However, he had to pause his education at Kalamandalam briefly to pursue higher studies. Though he was employed as an engineer, the embers of his passion never died down. So, he quit his job and jumped right back to learning thullal, earning a post-graduation from Kalamandalam.



Vishnu M Gupta, Ottanthullal artist

Though Nambiar has written nearly 70 thullal pieces, only about 12 are usually enacted. Many choose to perform only the well-known works... I feel like it is my duty to bring all of Nambiar's works to life on stage

Vishnu M Gupta, Ottanthullal artist

Despite being known as the 'poor man's kathakali', Ottanthullal has so much more to it than its perceived simplicity. As Vishnu points out, anyone who understands Malayalam can enjoy it. The humorous verses were Nambiar's way of

criticising society without actually pointing fingers at anyone. "He uses humour to prompt the audience to think for themselves," states the artist.

"Though Nambiar has written nearly 70 thullal pieces, only about 12 are usually enacted on stage," rues Vishnu. "Many choose to perform only the well-known works because it is difficult to memorise 1,500-2,500 lines of new material. I feel like it is my duty to bring all of Nambiar's works to life on stage," he continues.

During his recent performance at the temple festival at Sree Poornathrayeesa temple in Thripunithura, he choreographed and performed one such work, 'Syamanthakam'.

Unlike other artforms, thullal has the artist interacting with the audience as well. It is a great way to make them feel involved and keep them excited, Vishnu believes. "When I point to someone in the audience, they become a character in the performance. The audience becomes curious, wondering who will be next — it keeps them on edge," he says. This is one of the many reasons why thullal became popular. "Nambiar envisioned thullal to be a very inclusive art form. No matter your religion, caste or gender, this is an art form that anyone can master."

With over 12 years of experience as a thullal artist, Vishnu has received many awards and recognitions to substantiate it. While Vishnu is currently working as an engineer, he dedicates a considerable amount of time to the art as well. "One is my profession, the other is my passion," he says, adding, "In the future, I would love to turn my passion into a full-fledged career".



PIC: A SANESH

PARVANA K B

"TO fathers born alongside the sun, To fathers! To mothers who cradled the earth, in their wombs, To mothers! Here she comes, with songs embroidered to the strings of her hair; Stories whispered by the wind in her ears, her steps awake the bones buried under the ground, Her shadow lights up the long nights of life. Bless her! Bless her! Bless her! Here she comes, carrying the past, present, future on her back. Bless her! Here she comes, from the soil wet by sweat and blood. Bless her! Here she comes, with spirit unbroken, a story yet to be told. Bless her! Bless every word, bless every step, bless every dream and hope. Bless her! Bless her! Bless her!"

The hum gradually becomes a murmur that swells with the voices of women — working, creating, and resisting. This is the atmosphere at The Neighbour Gallery, a new space in the capital city envisioned by artists Joe Paul Cyriac and Valentina Abenavoli. The gallery opened with an exhibition that reflects its mission: exploring the power of shared spaces where gathering fosters care, creativity, and challenges soci-

## A reckoning spurred by Hema Committee report



Gender and caste are challenges we believe must be addressed. The idea for this space came to us around the time the report was released. So, we decided to go with the theme

Joe Paul Cyriac, artist

etal norms.

The exhibition, titled You Cannot Act Upon What You Cannot See, focuses on the silences, and violence experienced by women in Malayalam cinema.

"This is a reckoning, an invitation to acknowledge what the world tends to ignore," says Joe. Artists Aleena, Meera KM, Anjana Dev, Sreeja Pallam,

Miriam Chandy Menacherry, and the Neighbour Collective have created a space that urges visitors to pause and think.

A sound installation honouring actor P K Rosy welcomes visitors with poetry, setting the tone. At its core is the Hema Committee report, displayed with stories of injustice. The exhibit begins with history — a single photograph, the only

surviving image of Rosy, the first woman in Malayalam cinema who challenged caste and gender norms.

Meera's sculpture inspired by Rosy is a tribute to her resilience. Anjana's 'Oru Chayakada Scene' reimagines a tea shop filled with women reclaiming public spaces, highlighting the importance of cultural shifts. Sreeja's works capture women in their workplaces, complemented by photographs of the founding members of the Women in Cinema Collective at their professional spaces. Also showcased is Miriam's Reframing Gender, a documentary that traces the creation and evolution of the WCC.

"The gallery is more of an artist-run exhibition space where we use art to spark conversations on issues that matter. Gender and caste are challenges we believe must be addressed. The idea for this space came to us around the time the report was released. So, we decided to go with the theme," Joe explains.

"We believe in the power of art to transform the way we see the world. It comes with its share of challenges, and hopes. To everyone who dreams, reflects, and carries diverse truths within them — welcome to Neighbour," Valentina adds.

The exhibition will conclude on February 8