

SRI KRISHNA GANA SABHA - A PRODUCT OF ONE MAN'S VISION AND MISSION

by **Lakshmi Devnath**

"Krishna Gana Sabha is fifty years old," announces, R. Yagnaraman, the eighty-years old secretary of the institution. He functions with an enthusiasm that masks his physical age. His foster child - the Krishna Gana Sabha also exhibits the same exuberant spirit with its gleaming, ethnic exteriors and an air-conditioned interior. The joint journey of this foster parent and his child commenced from the year 1957. But let us read their story right from the start.

It was the 1950's. The up and coming musician Maharajapuram Santhanam, for various reasons, decided that his locality - T. Nagar needed a music sabha. At that time, sabhas in the city, were sparse and scattered at long distance. The thought crystallized. The Krishna Gana Sabha was born in 1954, at an auditorium in the premises of the Hindi Prachar Sabha, at Thyagaraya Nagar, Chennai. The choice of the name could not have been more appropriate. For like Lord Krishna, the Sabha, in its coming years, was to nurture both music and dance in equal measure. Maharajapuram Viswanatha Iyer took over as the first President of the Sabha and Santhanam became its Founder Secretary. The residents of the area joyfully welcomed the fledgling Sabha. They enrolled in large numbers. One of them was a music and dance crazy young man - R. Yagnaraman.

The history of Krishna Gana Sabha cannot be narrated without dwelling on the contribution of its General Secretary R. Yagnaraman to its growth. For, the stories of both the Sabha and its Secretary, for obvious reasons, are inextricably linked.

Pazhamaneri R. Yagnaraman came from a culturally rich family. He was a qualified lawyer but it was the fine arts that were in his veins. His enthusiasm in the arts was further spurred by his father's words, "everybody earns money. Money is not the be all and end all of things. I want to see you make a mark in your chosen field. That is my desire." The father's desire came true but unfortunately he was not alive to witness in his son's success. Anyway, to resume the tale...

Yagnaraman's participation in the Sabha's activities must have impressed the Maharajapurams for within a short span of approximately three years, Yagnaraman was appointed as committee member. The demands of a successful concert career prevented Maharajapuram Santhanam from devoting adequate attention to the Sabha's activities. In 1957, Yagnaraman was offered the post of Joint Secretary of the Sabha and in 1958 rose to become the General Secretary of the Sabha - a position he had held every since. In the first three years of its inception, the Sabha did not even have a sheltered auditorium but functioned from an open-air auditorium at the Hindi Prachar Sabha and later on at the premises offered at the Thakkar Baba Vidyalaya - T. Nagar.

In 1957, when Yagnaraman took over the responsibility of managing the Sabha, he discovered that the Sabha's finances were in doldrums. The administration was in a mess and as a consequence the Sabha's membership was fast dwindling. Yagnaraman realized that it was time for concrete action. Such was his commitment to the arts that on his own personal undertaking, he negotiated a three-ground accommodation for a three-year lease in Nageswara Rao Road. Again on personal security, he obtained a loan, from the Melurkode Bank, of Rs.5000/- payable in installments. A thatched hut (kottagai) with a dais sprung up at the new locale. On Vinayaka Chaturthi the Sabha, in its new location, was inaugurated. The inaugural concert was by G.N. Balasubramaniam, with Lalgudi Jayaraman on the violin and Palani Subramania Pillai and his disciple Trichy Sankaran on the mrdangams. It was a great start, which augured a promising future.

Stalwart musicians like Ariyakudi, Semmangudi, GNB, Alathur Brothers, Madurai Mani, Madurai Somu, DKP, MS, MLV and others, young geniuses of the times like Flute Mali, Lalgudi Jayaraman and so on, dancers of the calibre of Balasaraswati, Kamala, Vyjayanthimala to name a few, dramatists like the TKS brothers, S.V. Sahasranamam and thespian Sivaji Ganesan are but a sampling of the big names who enthusiastically participated in giving programmes at this venue. The demand for membership at the Sabha soared. The Sabha was now literally bursting at its seams. Added to this was the fact that the three-year lease was coming to an end.

Jubilant at the enthusiastic response to his endeavours, Yagnaraman took the initiative of locating a new premise for the Sabha. A ten and half ground plot was identified at Griffith Road - T. Nagar. The land was taken on a long lease and a semi permanent shed erected. A loan of Rs.30,000/- at an interest rate of 6% repayable in seven years, was raised as loans from members. In the ensuing years, Yagnaraman's administrative skills ensured that the loan amount was repaid much ahead of the scheduled date. Five hundred steel chairs were arranged by the Sabha's Vice President M.V. Venkataraman. The basic needs being taken care of the Sabha under the leadership of Yagnaraman was all set to embark upon the next phase of its journey.

In 1961, the new premise of the Sabha was inaugurated on Griffith Road. The inaugural concert was by Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer and a dance drama based on Jayadeva's Gita Govinda performed by the Kalakshetra troupe. Having provided for the basic infrastructure, Yagnaraman now turned his attention to organizing bountiful programmes that were marked by innovation and quality. In those days comprehensive festivals, for music or dance spanning a continuous period of time, were a rarity. In fact, Yagnaraman, himself, desirous of a sumptuous treat of music, would pedal on his bicycle to the distant Perambur Sangeetha Sabha to participate in its annual anniversary series of concerts. The sheer joy he derived from these events inspired him to start one on similar lines at his own Sabha.

The Gokulashtami Sangeetha Utsavam concerts took shape at Krishna Gana Sabha. The first year saw five concerts by different artists - Sheik Chinna Moulana (Nageswara), Chitti Babu (Veenai), T.R. Mahalingam (Flute), M.S. Subbulakshmi and Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. The successive years saw a gradual increase in the number of concerts featured in this series. In the year 2003, the total number of concerts featuring in these sessions have reached a mind boggling sixty performances that gets spread over two months. Over the years, the agenda of the Sabha's programmes has also featured a delectable variety of programmes in different categories of the fine arts - music, exclusive Nageswara festivals, drama, upanyasam, Namasankeerthanam, dance and a few others as well.

Today, the Sabha organizes three major festivals in a year. The first is dedicated to music, the second is held for music and dance and the third for drama. On the inaugural day of each of these festivals, an artist of recognition is honoured with Sangeetha Choodamani (music), Nritya Choodamani (dance) and Nadiga Choodamani (drama). In the year 2002, the Acharya Choodamani (teacher) award has also been instituted. The honours carries with them a cash award of Rs.25,000/- each and a gold medal. A noteworthy feature is that the festivals offer a good measure of classical music and dance from a variety of classical arts of India. Thus the Sabha has hosted music concerts by redoubtable ustads of the North like Bade Ghulam Ali Khan, Amir Khan, Parveen Sultan, Pandit Bhimsen Joshi, Pandit Jasraj, Siddheswari Devi, Munwar Ali Khan, Vilayat Khan, Sivakumar Sharma and Amjad Ali Khan. It is noteworthy that in the month of December, while the rest of the Sabhas in the city concentrate on music programmes, Krishna Gana Sabha, for the last twenty two years, conducts a Natya Kala Conference where the year's Nritha Choodamani awardee is giving the honour of convening the conference. Again, another exclusive feature of the Sabha's festivals is that the awards are open to excellence in all systems of classical music and dances of India. Thus nearly twenty-six artistes from various fields of art, starting from the year 1976, have been recipients of this prestigious award.

The Sabha while it honours maestros and stalwarts does not lag behind in encouraging young talent as well. Talent promotion of young artistes both in music and dance has been the main agenda of the Sabha for over thirty-five years. The Pongal Dance Festival, conducted in the month of January, is organized primarily to encourage young and talented dancers and give them prizes for their performances in a bid to promote their interest in the art.

Realizing that providing education in the arts is the only step to create a future generation of artistes, Krishna Gana Sabha runs a Sangeetha Vidyalaya, which is as old as the Sabha itself. The school provides for training in Karnatic Vocal, Veena, Mridangam and Bharatanatyam. Today, more than one hundred and fifty students receive instructions in the art from this school. Another pioneering effort that this Sabha has taken is to open a school for those interested in learning Namasankeerthanam singing in the traditional way. For smaller programmes a mini hall has also been opened in the Sabha premises in the recent past.

With such enviable and noteworthy achievements to its credit, it is not surprising that the Krishna Gana Sabha has been selected by the Tamil Nadu Government as the best run cultural institution and its General Secretary has been honoured with the title Kalaimamani. Just like the Sabha has many firsts to its credit, its chief leader also has many firsts to his credit. While the normal practice is to honour artistes, Yagnaraman is a rare example of a Sabha secretary who has been recognized for his efforts. His laurels include his election as the executive members of the Iyal Isai Natakam and later on as its Vice Chairman as well. His music knowledge was recognised when he was requested to be on the audition panel of A.I.R. Admiration for his administrative skills came when he was elected as President of Federation of the Sabhas for five years. In this position he united the Sabhas of South and North Madras and organized music festivals in those Sabhas that, for various reasons, had been unable to organize them. In recognition of his untiring service to the cause of fine arts, Yagnaraman was honoured by the Seve Ratna award at the Cleveland Tyagaraja Festival organized at distant Ohio-USA.

Krishna Gana Sabha and its dynamic Secretary have certainly had an achievement - filled and eventful life. Now, in the year 2004, the Sabha is fifty years old and all set to celebrate its golden jubilee. Remarkably this fifty-year young sabha and its eighty year young secretary are like young steeds raring to scale greater heights.

Reminiscences of a veteran Sabha Secretary -

Those days (in the 1950's and 60's) payments to artistes were not much. Inclusive of train fare, I remember giving Palghat Mani Iyer a cheque for Rs.250/-. But irrespective of the monetary compensation, the artistes of those times were very cooperative. A spirit of camaraderie existed between us (the artistes and the sabha secretaries). The artistes were also not egocentric. On occasions when I couldn't meet vidwans who came from outstation, the artistes themselves would take the trouble of coming home and inform me of their concert schedules and discuss as to where I could fit them in. Some artistes like Annaswami Bhagavatar would even opt to stay in my house.

I can never forget the following incident. Mahavidwan Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar was once invited to perform in a wedding concert. The date of that concert fell close to the one fixed for his Sabha concert. He actually asked for my consent for the wedding concert. For, in those times, the vidwans believed in spacing out their concerts to keep the interests of the listeners alive and make them literally thirst for their concerts.

Lalgudi Jayaraman has performed fifty solo concerts in this Sabha continuously for the past fifty years. In fact such is his magnanimity that he openly says that he too has grown (in stature) along with the Sabha. He has been one of our steadfast well-wishers participating in all the Sabha's functions however big or small.

I remember on one occasion, Madurai Somu had to cancel his scheduled concert due to ill health. I had to fill the slot post haste as the concert had already been announced to the public. I approached Manakkal Rangarajan who refused to sing saying that he had no necessity to be the second choice for a concert. I then approached Madurai Mani Iyer and placed before him my predicament. He spontaneously accepted saying, "Addukku enna, paadina pocchu." (so what? I will certainly sing). He suggested that I fix up Lalgudi Jayaraman and Palani Subramania Pillai as his accompanists. The concert next day was a roaring success!

Alathur brothers, Ariyakudi, Semmangudi, GNB, Madurai Mani, Lalgudi.... all these and other stalwarts of yore have never stipulated a fee for their concerts. On the contrary, they have all been very cooperative and helpful.

Those were the days when top performers attended each other's concerts. Papa Venkatramiah, Palani Subramania Pillai were also regulars in the audience. I remember Semmangudi attending Mali's concerts, G.N.B. attending Somu's concerts and so on.

Those days we had simple mike systems that provided for great concerts. Today's culture of continuously raising the volume of the mike was not there then.

Again, applauding at the end of every item in a concert is a practice that we have adopted from the western scenario. In my opinion it is very disturbing and disturbs the overall atmosphere.

On one occasion, Palghat Mani Iyer took ill and could not come for the scheduled concert. The main performers were the Alathur brothers. We had to substitute somebody of comparable calibre in the place of Mani Iyer. The brothers themselves suggested that they will have a double mrdangam with Umayalpuram Sivaraman and Palghat Raghu. They personally came with me to these vidwans' house who also agreed. From there we went to the office of The Hindu at 12 midnight to change the announcement. The concert the following day was a roaring success.

I think M.S. has given the largest number of cutcheries in our Sabha. The couple (M.S. and Sadasivam) would never accept any money and would want us to forward the cheques to different institutions specified by them.

Balasaraswati performed for many years at our Sabha. I remember paying her not more than Rs.1000/- for a performance. She would simply say, "pay what you can." She was truly great.

I was very fond of M.D. Ramanathan's music. I would arrange leading artistes as accompaniments for him.

One last word.

In public institutions such as these, too much of democracy is actually detrimental to its interests. The committee members should have faith in the Chief Organiser of the institution and allow him to function independently.