

+ Morsing maestro

IN FOCUS From a humble beginning, Ghantasala Satya Sai made an impressive journey to become one of India's morsing artistes.

ARUNA CHANDARAJU

In 1981, when Ghantasala Satya Sai came to Hyderabad as a teenager, he turned newspaper-delivery boy to earn the money for his monthly bus-pass. "The princely sum of Rs. 125 thus earned helped pay for the bus-pass for the commute to my guru's house and to various auditoriums to attend concerts as part of my learning; besides sundry personal expenses. I would fantasise about owning a phone, and playing in a Madras Music Academy concert -- my two dreams then," he recalls.

Today, Sai is recognised as India's leading morsing artiste with over 12,000 concerts in 72 countries, including at prestigious venues like United Nations HQ, Madras Music Academy, and before his guru Sathya Sai Baba. His music-feats are part of Guinness Book of World Records, Limca Book of Records, and Asia Book of Records. Sai has accompanied maestros like M. Balamuralikrishna, Nedunuri Krishnamurthy, Pandit Jasraj, Amjad Ali Khan, Hariprasad Chaurasia, Shivakumar Sharma, N. Ramani, U. Shrinivas, top Western drummers, and L. Subramaniam with whom he has an enduring association. Titles include Morsing Samrat from the AP Government.

Growing up in Vijayawada, Sai learnt mridangam from M. Radhakrishnamurthy and Dandamudu Sumathi Rammohanrao. One day, he attended mridangam stalwart Yella Venkateswara Rao's concert in his town, resolved to take advanced training from him and moved to Hyderabad. He rose in guru Yella's esteem and gradually began to accompany him at concerts. Sai also became AIR Yuvavani artiste for mridangam, ghatam and khanjira.

One day, Yella suggested he learn morsing as there were no morsing artistes in Andhra Pradesh.

It was a hard-to-find instrument. After a long hunt, Sai found one in Old City, late at night. "I was so excited that I sat down in Gowliguda bustop and immediately began playing it! Till a suspicious policeman came and shooed me off after asking what I was doing there at midnight!"

Sai taught himself. Morsing has the same aural syllables as mridangam. "It was very painful. My mouth would bleed, I would sometimes cough up blood after a practice session. And my throat would crack. But I persisted."



PERSISTENT EFFORTS Morsing vidwan Gantasala Satya Sai.

PHOTO: M. SUBHASH

Six months later, he played it onstage first time -- around 1985-86 -- accompanying Yella.

Sai also became Hyderabad AIR's first morsing artiste. Sabhas sat up and took notice; he got performance opportunities and later from top musicians.

After a stint as DAV school's music teacher, he was appointed by ITC Kakatiya Hyderabad, as artiste for live music at their restaurant. In 1997, L. Subramaniam, who had checked into the hotel, overhead him practising and asked for him. "I went, nervously. Subramaniam sir played aadi thalam and asked me to play morsing to it; next khandachapu thalam. I complied again. He then asked me to accompany him at

this concert the following day! After that, I regularly accompanied him in India and abroad. It was because of Subramaniam sir that I visited and performed in so many countries including famous venues, and realised my dream of playing in Madras Music Academy--all while accompanying him. He has given me countless opportunities!"

Sai has won praise from stalwarts including a titan like Balamuralikrishna. At Sai's 24-hour Guinness-record concert in 2009 it was Balamuralikrishna who gave the first recital. Sai humbly attributes all his success to God's grace. "Divine grace has brought me this far and will hopefully sustain me lifelong."