

Patriot and promoter of arts

S. Satyamurti

Satyamurti was one of the stalwarts of the Indian National Congress during the pre-Independence years. He was a famous lawyer, renowned orator, debater and brilliant parliamentarian. For his uncommon courage, he earned the appellation “Dheerar”. He was also a theatre personality, and a connoisseur and promoter of the performing arts.

Stamp on Satyamurti

The Department of Posts issued a commemorative stamp in honour of S. Satyamurti on 22 August 1987. It is in den. of 60 P, perf. 13, multi-coloured, and was printed on un-watermarked PG Matt coated paper by photogravure process at India Security Press, Nasik.

The stamp has a portrait of Satyamurti wearing a Gandhi cap, like all congressmen of his time. The First Day Cover also carries his picture.

His life

The short biography that follows is largely based on the excellent study titled *Life of Satyamurti* by P.G. Sundararajan (South Asian Publishers).

Satyamurti was born on 19 August 1887 in Tirumayam village in the erstwhile principality of Pudukottai in Tamil Nadu. After schooling at Pudukottai, he graduated from Madras Christian College, and later passed law examination in first class. He worked initially in the chambers of V.V. Sreenivasa Iyengar and later



with S. Sreenivasa Iyengar, former President of the Indian National Congress.

During his college days he was drawn to the freedom movement. His powerful speech opposing an array of distinguished leaders marked him as a parliamentarian in the making. In 1923 he was elected to the Madras Legislative Council. He served the Council for two terms, from 1923 to 1929. His performances in the Council, including the one in espousal of Subramania Bharati’s songs in October 1927, established him as one of the most accomplished parliamentarians of the day (see box). In 1934 he was elected to the Central Legislative Assembly. It marked the beginning of the greatest and last phase of his glorious parliamentary career – from 1934 to 1939.

A theatre artist

Before the arrival of cinema in the mid 1930s, stage plays by professional

troupe and amateur groups were the main source of entertainment for the people. More famous among the troupes in Chennai was Suguna Vilas Sabha founded in 1891 by Pammal Sambandha Mudaliar. Of his more frequently performed dramas was *Manohara*, a didactic historical play. The title role of *Manohara* was (and even now) considered the touchstone of histrionic ability of an actor. In 1935 Satyamurti acted in that lead role. Besides acting, Satyamurti also helped in directing plays.

He also acted in Sanskrit dramas. He played the roles of Aswathama in *Veni Samharam* and *Charudatta* in the all time classic *Mrichchhakatika*. He also acted as vidooshaka in the latter, as also in Kalidasa’s *Malavikagnimitram*, in both of which the genius E. Krishna Iyer was cast in feminine roles. Satyamurti also took great interest in stage equipment and production.

Association with the Music Academy

Satyamurti was one of the founding members of the Music Academy. In fact he was one of the vice presidents of the executive committee of the All India Music Conference held at Madras in 1927 (during the Madras session of the Indian National Conference) that ultimately led to the founding of the Academy.

During the 1929 Conference of the Academy, Satyamurti vehemently opposed singing of the pallavi in concerts. He requested the musicians to do away with it or at least reduce

the time taken for it. The Academy succumbed to his oratory and passed a resolution to restrict pallavi-singing to half hour. Only decades later, the pallavi regained its status as the main piece in concerts.

In his welcome address at the Music Academy on the opening day of the music season in 1934 he called for 'establishment of a music federation in the city, setting standards for selection of compositions and other improvements and preventing unhealthy competitions'. Speaking on the last day of the same season, he supported the Academy's insistence on the performers giving the list of songs in advance, and avoiding drinking (water/beverages) and taking snuff on the stage. Predictably, these suggestions were frowned upon by the orthodox lovers of music.

In many of his speeches and writings, Satyamurti called for disciplined listening on the part of listeners (see box). He had a piece of advice for musicians as well. He urged them not to give disproportionate importance to pallavi singing, and to include more Tamil songs in their concerts, particularly while giving performances to Tamil audience. He also urged them to project the spirit of the song – its *sahitya* and *bhava*.

Friend of musicians

Almost all top ranking performers of his time were his personal friends – like Ariyakudi, Musiri, Chembai, DKP, MS, Muthiah Bhagavatar and his cousin T.L. Venkatarama Iyer, Saraswati Bai, Chowdiah, Palani, Papa Venkataramiah, and Pudukottai Dakshinamurthy Pillai.

During his election campaigns in 1936, Musiri and K.B. Sundarambal came forward to sing patriotic songs in his meetings to rouse the audience. Towards the end of 1940, Satyamurti decided to offer 'individual *satyagraha*', and on the

morning of that day, he arranged a violin concert by Papa Venkataramiah at his house. It was attended by a large number of people, in spite of a prohibitory order. At the end of the concert, Satyamurti went out, made an anti-War speech and courted arrest.

Chembai introduced a young prodigy to him, and on his suggestion Satyamurti arranged a performance for him at his residence; the prodigy was none other than Palghat Mani Iyer.

Supporter of Bharatanatyam

When E. Krishna Iyer championed the revival of Bharatanatyam and its introduction in the Music Academy, Satyamurti wholeheartedly supported the move.

At the golden jubilee celebrations of the Congress in 1935, he arranged Bharatanatyam recitals in the Khadi and Swadeshi Exhibition held in conjunction with it. In his address at the Music Conference organised by the Academy in December 1935, Satyamurti praised the Academy for restoring Bharatanatyam to its 'pristine place of honour'.

Satyamurti was a pioneer in arranging recitals of Hindustani musicians in Chennai. As a part of the cultural festival during the Golden Jubilee celebrations of Congress in 1935, he invited Hindustani musician Manji Khan from Bombay to Madras. He also arranged for a Bharatanatyam performance by Kumbakonam Varalakshmi and Bhanumati in Delhi.

Other contributions

He was President of the Faculty of Fine arts, University of Madras and the Chairman of the Board of Studies in Music.

The introduction of degree courses with music as a major in Madras and Annamalai Universities owes a

great deal to Satyamurti's persistent efforts.

In the mid 1930s, the motion picture was making its appearance. People in the film industry who knew about Satyamurti's personal knowledge of the stage medium sought his help in solving their problems. He was elected President of South Indian Film Chambers in 1937 and 1938, and was invited to preside over the All India Motion Picture Congress at Bombay in 1939.

Satyamurti effectively used the broadcasting media (AIR) and delivered a large number of talks on various matters of public interest. His relations with AIR were so good that he was requested to open the first Radio Exhibition organised by it in Madras in December 1938.

Satyamurti had served the Madras Corporation as a councilor and as an Alderman for fifteen years and had been uniformly active in the affairs of the city. Towards the end of 1933 his portrait was unveiled in Madras Corporation to honour his long service to the civic body. And, as a well deserved culmination of his service, he was elected Mayor of the Corporation in November 1939. His signal achievement during the mayoral term was the launching of the Poondi reservoir.

The extreme privations that Satyamurti suffered in various jails took a toll on his none-too-robust frame. Considering his poor health he was transferred to Madras General Hospital in December 1942. In February 1943 he was released on medical grounds. However he could not leave the hospital because of the fragile nature of his health. At one hour past midnight he breathed his last. He was only 55.

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(Music philatelist and old time associate of *Sruti*)