

Music Sabhas

Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha

Sri Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha (Shanmukhananda Sabha) is a leading cultural organisation in Mumbai, with a glorious record of service to fine arts to its credit. Over the past half century it has evolved into a centre for national integration and cultural synthesis. Established in 1952, the Sabha celebrated its diamond jubilee in July 2012. Earlier, it had celebrated its golden jubilee in August 2002. On both the occasions the Department of Posts, Maharashtra and Goa Circle, released special covers. That the Department issued two special covers on the same organisation speaks much about the prestige and reputation the Shanmukhananda Sabha enjoys in Mumbai.

Special covers

The Golden Jubilee cover was issued on 31 August 2002. The cancellation depicts the emblem of the Sabha and indicates the occasion. The cover has a picture of

the building of the Sabha with the figure 50 thereon and the inscription 'Golden Jubilee Year'. The Diamond Jubilee cover, issued on 17 July 2012, has been cancelled with a stylised figure '60' as also a sketch of a diamond and the words "Six Glorious Decades of Fine Arts". The cover has the emblem of the Sabha and symbols representing the performing arts.

Brief history

Shanmukhananda Fine Arts and Sangeetha Sabha came into existence in 1952 with the merger of the original Shanmukhananda Sabha established in 1944 with the Indian Fine Arts Society (1944) and the South Indian Sangeetha Sabha (1927). The merger was the brainchild of Prof. T.V. Ramanujam, who was a member of the original Shanmukhananda. Along with a handful of like-minded colleagues, he was to guide the destiny of Shanmukhananda for the next two decades.

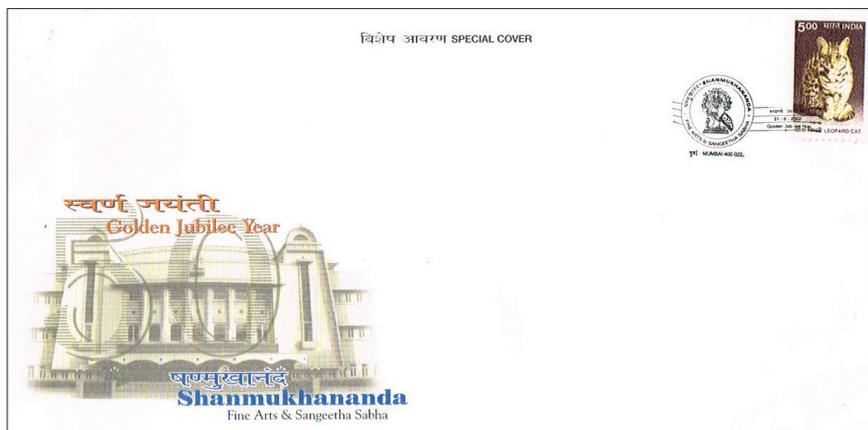


The Sabha acquired a plot in the Sion Matunga Estate in 1954 with the help of Congressman S.K. Patil, and started conducting monthly concerts in a pandal on that plot to raise funds for building a hall of its own. The foundation stone for the hall was laid on 26 January 1958, by S.K. Patil, then a Union Minister. It took five years to build the auditorium at a cost of Rs. 30 lakh. Vijayalakshmi Pandit, then Governor of Maharashtra, inaugurated it on 22 August 1963.

Ariyakudi Ramanuja Iyengar, accompanied by T.N. Krishnan and Palghat Mani Iyer, performed at the inaugural function. There were two more concerts on that occasion – one by Chembai Vaidyanatha Bhagavata and the other by M.S. Subbulakshmi.

A statue of Lord Shanmukha, the 'protecting deity' of the Sabha, was unveiled by V.P. Naik, Chief Minister of Maharashtra, on 3 June 1970. It is installed at the centre of the facade of the hall. It was sculpted by L. Somanatha Sthapati of Tiruchirappalli.

The membership of the Sabha steadily grew, crossed the 5000 mark



in 1975, and reached a peak of 5904 in 1990, necessitating the Sabha to hold two performances of every artist on consecutive days, a distinction few sabhas could boast.

The fire and the resurrection

In February 1990, a major fire devastated the hall and reduced it to ruins; it took nearly a decade to build it anew. Meanwhile performances were conducted in a pandal in the nearby Indian Gymkhana. With generous help from patrons, art lovers and the central and state governments, particularly the Government of Maharashtra, a new auditorium was built at a cost of Rs. 13 crore. The 'grihapravesam' was held on 1 October 1998.

A bounty of a crore of rupees donated by a devotee of the Kanchi Kamakoti Peetham prompted the management to rename the auditorium as Sri Shanmukhananda Chandrasekhara Saraswati Auditorium on 27 December 2000, and a life-size portrait of the Paramacharya was unveiled in the auditorium.

The list of artists who have performed in Shanmukhananda over the years reads like a veritable who's who, and includes artists from all genres – Carnatic, Hindustani, folk and Western classical music.

Besides cultural performances, the Sabha is made available for holding religious discourses, school functions, corporate meetings and even political conventions. The All India Congress Committee decided to hold its session in the Sabha in 1963. The Worthington centrifugal system for air-conditioning was yet to be commissioned. The golden jubilee souvenir describes how the exigency was handled. About 4000 delegates were to enjoy an air-cool environment as they participated in the session and listened to prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Blue Star Engineering turned to ice-cooling

to provide relief. Truckloads of ice blocks were dumped into the water tank every hour to chill the water to 48 degree F which then cooled the air in the packed auditorium. Never in the history of air-conditioning has a building been cooled by ice.

Allied activities

A music school, Sangeetha Vidyalaya, was opened in 1956, and a two-year diploma course in Carnatic music was started in 1976. The school was re-designated Sangeetha Mahavidyalaya in 2002 and affiliated to Mumbai University.

A medical centre, set up in 1974, provides a host of health care services at nominal rates to the members and the general public. A quarterly journal, *Shanmukha*, was launched in 1975. A women's wing was started in 1999, and a theatre group in 2002. An archival centre called the Kanchi Mahaswami Sangrahalaya was set up in the Sabha in 2008.

The 11th of May 2013 was a landmark day for Shanmukhananda Sabha. On that day it conducted its 15,000th programme, claimed to be an achievement unmatched by any music sabha in the country. Bharata Kalanjali of Chennai presented *Aikya Bhaaratam*, a programme of classical and folk dances of India.

Awards and honours

The Sabha instituted the Sri Shanmukhananda National Eminence Award in Fine Arts, and the Siromani Award for talented young artists. The first National Eminence Award was presented in 2002 to vidwan Semmangudi Srinivasa Iyer. The first recipient of the Siromani Awards were Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Shruti Sadolikar and Niladri Kumar.

Rare honours to MS

The Sabha has bestowed rare honours on M.S. Subbulakshmi. It instituted

an award, called Bharat Ratna Dr. M.S. Subbulakshmi Sangeetha Pracharya Award, to be given to an eminent teacher every year on M.S. Subbulakshmi's birthday, 16 September, or close thereto. [*The styling of the award does not seem appropriate, as it includes the nation's highest award in the title and sounds misleading – Editor.*] Besides, it named one of its halls as the Bharat Ratna Dr. M.S. Subbulakshmi Auditorium.

Recently it installed a statue of MS at its entrance. The eight-foot high ebonite statue was unveiled by M.K. Narayanan, Governor of West Bengal, on 21 September 2013. (The icon has come in for adverse comment for not accurately representing MS). Visitors can also take a look at a letter addressed to MS by Mahatma Gandhi. It adorns the portrait gallery, also named after MS, opened on the same day.

Builders of Shanmukhananda

The Sabha brought out a souvenir titled *A Peep Into the Past*, on the occasion of its golden jubilee. In it the Sabha hails Prof. T.V. Ramanujam, R.S. Mani and Dr. V. Subramaniam as "The Trinity of Institution Builders". The Sabha has installed their busts in the foyer of the auditorium. It may be appropriate to add the name of S. Seshadri and make it a Quartet. Seshadri served the Sabha for a record 44 years from its inception, as a Member of the Managing Committee, Treasurer, Secretary and Vice President. His selfless service earned him enviable respect and recognition in the cultural world. Indeed his name became synonymous with Shanmukhananda.

S. SANKARANARAYANAN
(Music philatelist and old time associate of *Sruti*)